

Flooding the Limits of Thought: Language, Desire, and Aesthetic Experience

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This dissertation examines works by Louise Bourgeois, Sophie Calle, Marguerite Duras, Roni Horn, Clarice Lispector, and Kiki Smith, to discuss the rethinking of reading, viewing, and dwelling that they incite. My selection of enigmatic pieces demonstrates how each one uniquely sets forth a fundamental claim: that the work of art consists in closing in on “l’insaisissable de la pensée,” a phrase coined by Hélène Cixous in describing Roni Horn’s reworking of a text by Clarice Lispector. I turn to discuss the reader’s role upon encountering this ungraspable of thought, since all of the pieces in play here explicitly call for a reader’s participation in the creative process constitutive of the work of art. I advance that they challenge the reader to an interpretation more concerned with a vibrancy that overflows signification than with retrieving meaning. The work of art creates spaces made up of oblique, non-interchangeable webs of signifiers, so as to construct, as process and site, what resists being understood in terms of an apprehensible object. Given the fleeting nature of water and flows, they materialize the work’s uncharted event—in sculptural installations combining water and transparent glass or in photographs and film sequences featuring surfaces of streams coursing through cities. My project details, furthermore, the way in which desire fuels this aesthetic experience in the sense, as manifest in the French ‘expérience,’ of an experiment: a constrained, perilous exposure to the unknown. Foregrounding figures of liquidity and flow, I show that desire’s excessive quality is here intrinsic to questions of sexual difference. My dissertation discusses femininity as a stance

regarding desire that offers unique perspectives on language and knowledge, developing its privileged position to undertake reading that confronts the limits of thought, which is integral to the artistic procedure as articulated by these pieces. Intertextuality informs my approach to each of the works, finding novel bridges among them and pivotal references they bear to the French literary canon and Western philosophy.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

María Fernanda Negrete received her B.A. with honors in Philosophy in 2005, from Universidad Iberoamericana, in Mexico City, Mexico, where she presented a thesis on the work of Gilles Deleuze. In 2005 she entered the French Literature graduate program of the Department of Romance Studies, at Cornell University. In addition to obtaining her M.A. there also in 2008, she travelled widely and intensely during these years: studying Portuguese in Lisbon, Portugal; teaching English at the Université de Paris 12, Val-de-Marne; conducting research in Paris, France, Stykkishólmur, Iceland, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil; and presenting her work in French at the University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy, in Japan, in 2010. She defended this dissertation before her special committee on September 9, 2011.

a la memoria de Nenetú
et mon eau m'arc-en-ciel

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INTRODUCTION

Reading the Work Offshore

Intertexte à l'eau

“Water Is The Master Verb.” This proposition rings true in the writing, photographs, film, and installation pieces by Louise Bourgeois, Sophie Calle, Marguerite Duras, Roni Horn, Clarice Lispector, and Kiki Smith this dissertation examines, drawing a certain concept of aesthetic experience concerned with the limits of thought and language. Roni Horn wrote this sentence in a 2004 book entitled *Wonderwater Alice Offshore*, a book of Horn’s pieces’ titles, in fact, annotated by four authors—Louise Bourgeois, Anne Carson, Hélène Cixous, and John Waters—whose distinctive strokes covering the nearly blank pages thus entered into a relation with the titles’ intentionally polyphonic and literary voice.¹ What kind of relation? An aquatic one, a characteristic that causes echoes, resonances, puns, and other contagious effects of the associative, fluid, intertextual kinds of reading Horn’s titles welcome, as the title of the book itself shows in twisting Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. Intertextuality is key to the creative process Horn and the other authors in this dissertation explore, set to work across verbal and non-verbal media, such that its function is intimately tied to a search that must reach and even pass through the edge of language. Guided by this methodological strategy put forth by these authors, the following chapters propose an approach to their work that is attentive to literary

¹ The book was published in four volumes, one for each annotation, and also includes an envelope with comics by Anne Carson. The book’s “literary voice” alludes, among others, to Emily Dickinson, Franz Kafka, Italo Calvino, and evidently Lewis Carroll.

intertexts² that uniquely shape the conceptual stakes of the work of art and its way of thinking the ineffable.

A particular idea of intertextual creativity was decisive in Horn's choices both to become herself a reader of Clarice Lispector's *Água viva* (translated as *The Stream of Life*) through an installation piece called *Rings of Clarice Lispector* (Figure 4; both works analyzed in chapter one), and to invite an artist such as Louise Bourgeois to annotate *Wonderwater*. Below "Dictionary of Water" (51), for instance, Bourgeois writes "Precious Liquids," a subtitle that in turn titles an installation of her own, which chapter three explores by pairing it with Kiki Smith's two rows of twelve empty glass water coolers (*Untitled, 1986* and *Untitled, 1987-90*—Figures 29 and 30), each labeled with the name of a body fluid: semen, mucus, vomit, oil, tears, blood, milk, saliva, diarrhea, urine, sweat, and pus. In Horn's book, under the words "Precious Liquids," Bourgeois evokes Smith's water cooler installations by including this list of bodily fluids whose "precious" quality the chapter addresses. In a recording entitled *Saying Water* (2001), Roni Horn wonders: "When you see your reflection in water, do you see the water in you?" For Bourgeois and Smith it is crucial to do so, as chapter three will show, however self-estranging, or precisely for its self-estranging potential. Also in the *Saying Water* sound recording, Horn repeats the sentence, "Water is the master verb," and adds, "an act of perpetual relation." Inevitably, the relation struck by each annotator of *Wonderwater* is also with Horn's production in the plastic arts, insofar as the titles featured in this book belong to many of her projects in sculpture, photography, drawing, and installation, of which a large amount is indeed about water. It is not, moreover, an indirect relation to these works of art, since for Horn (as for Bourgeois) a title is

² In this way, chapter one, dedicated to Horn and Lispector, considers Biblical passages, fragments by the Presocratic philosophers, and Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite's negative theology; chapter two analyzes Duras in turning to Jean Racine's play *Bérénice*; chapter three, on Louise Bourgeois and Kiki Smith, examines the medieval Book of hours tradition and Blaise Pascal's fragment 185 (in LeGuern's edition); the final and fourth chapter, centered on Sophie Calle, reads a passage from Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

immanent to the piece it names; what the book collects is an aspect of her production in the plastic arts, among whose essential materials is language itself.³

Another Reader

Given Horn's peculiar, plastic treatment of language and titles, the gesture of asking these authors to annotate her book raises questions about reading. Does annotating involve explaining, the kind of reading that brings the cryptic text to light? If so, then a fundamental opacity to one's own words is implied in Horn's gesture, and then, so is "the other," different from me, and also the Other as the unknowable site from where sense could be made of this opacity—although making sense, with the "light" and "clarity" it should bring, does not necessarily make understood. That there is no return of an appropriable meaning to the one addressing an unknown addressee is an unmistakable mark of a process through the constraints of the Other, a point to which I will return. This dissertation addresses exactly these problems of reading in works of art that prominently call out to the other and for whose realization reading is imperative, but that all at once refuse to be read if not according to their singular, uncharted terms. Such terms are bound to the ineffable, which makes its extremely diaphanous or profoundly opaque appearance as unreadable writing, silence, elusive meaning, paradox, intractable materiality, absence of plot and/or protagonists, and as so many liquid forces. "The

³ For instance, her drawings' titles, featuring words in pencil throughout the paper, are frequently prepositions, conjunctions, articles, or verbs with roman numerals: *The IV*, *As IX*, *That VI*, *So XII* (image 2 in this introduction) are some examples. The numerals do not number the production in order or appearance, but instead, with the word that accompanies them, connect to the paper cuts, scribbled words, and figures that compose the drawing. Just as the verbal domain is intrinsic to Horn's production, in *Lispector* the pictorial and musical realms importantly traverse her writing and her own thought about the nature of writing, which she develops throughout her oeuvre. The epigraph for *Água viva*, which this dissertation examines together with works by Horn, is by Michel Seuphor, who wrote about abstract painting: "Il devait exister une peinture totalement libre de la dépendance de la figure—l'objet—qui, comme la musique, n'illustre aucune chose, ne raconte aucune histoire et ne lance aucun mythe. Une telle peinture se contente d'évoquer les règles incommunicables de l'esprit où le songe devient pensée, où le trait devient existence." "There ought to exist a painting totally free of dependence on figure—the object—which, like music, represents nothing at all, tells no story and propounds no myth. Such a painting limits itself to evoking the incommunicable realms of the spirit, where dream becomes thought, where trace becomes existence."

transparency of water is also the most opaque thing about it,” thinks Horn, reader of Lispector’s *Água viva*, whose voice speaks “à tona de brilhante escuridão” (14) ‘afloat on brilliant darkness’⁴ and asks the reader: “[c]apta essa coisa que me escapa e no entanto vivo dela” (14) ‘capture this thing that escapes me and yet I live from it.’ Confronting the reader with diverse expressions of the ineffable, these works set forth radically other ways of making sense, making light, making clear. Each work explored here is one that might never shimmer, sparkle, and reflect, unless the reader becomes immersed in the work’s own element, as one plunges into water, into “brilliant darkness.” Reading is integral to the creative process in which the work of art consists, according to texts by Bourgeois, Calle, Duras, Horn, Lispector, and Smith—in writing, photography, film, and installation art.

Installing Space

Installation can be a privileged medium to explore this problematic of reading within the unknown space of the work because it demands an actual physical entry into a space that has been configured according to its own laws, differentiating itself from the laws of functional, self-preserving dwelling, which impose themselves on the dweller’s mode of attention. “Language is the house of Being,” Heidegger famously claimed, and he also wrote that “man finds the proper abode of his existence in language, whether he is aware of it or not” (57); but the dwellings these installation artists invite us to explore house the *unheimlich*, the un-homely, and the unconscious, understood as the site of an Other knowledge,⁵ a *savoir* where neither language nor the reader is

⁴ Lispector in this oxymoron quotes Pseudo-Dionysus the Aeropagite’s *Mystical Theology*, which begins by praying for guidance to effectively take Christians to “where the mysteries of God’s Word/ lie simple, absolute and unchangeable/ in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence” (997 A-B).

⁵ The beginning of contemporary art and literature, at the turn of the twentieth century, is crucially informed by an idea of a “beyond” or “beneath” of consciousness. One could say that, along with the philosophical turn from the paradigm of consciousness to that of language—especially with Gottlob Frege, Martin Heidegger, the Vienna Circle, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and also with Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale*—the unconscious as a site for artistic creation forms a major axis in twentieth century art. Sigmund Freud of course gave language a central role in the discipline of psychoanalysis that he inaugurated. A post-Freudian aesthetic developed among

ever simply “at home” according to the principles of identity and autonomy. By making its visitor withdraw from ordinary space and temporality—where such principles of identity and autonomy prevail—the installation’s estranging effect triggers acts of reading that simply cannot abstract themselves from that torrent of stimuli the dweller has plunged into. Each space’s own restrictions impose a rigor to reading that not only installations but also this dissertation’s texts in graphic and cinematic media call for.

How then, does one “dwell in language” in these installations? In *Rings of Clarice Lispector* (2004), Horn makes readers take off their shoes and physically step into the ineffable surface of Lispector’s *Água viva*, transposed onto a floor made of large rubber tiles that can be set in different locations, on which inlaid words form “rings” made of phrases from Lispector’s text, whose title literally means “living water.” In *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* (2007) (Figure 10), Horn transforms an old town library in Iceland into a “lighthouse” by introducing twenty-four glass columns into the main room, each filled with water from a different Icelandic glacier, each creating reflections with the others and with the natural light and the harbor’s seawater outside. Reset in liquid state inside the building, the landscape’s interaction with what remains outside releases a new dwelling field of visibility and readership. A rubber floor covers the interior’s ground surface as well, on which are interspersed English and Icelandic adjectives applicable to both the weather and someone’s mood. The equal footing these words give to

modernists and the avant-gardes. Surrealism introduces an idea of the work of art that seeks to be produced and read according to repressed fantasies; Salvador Dalí’s paranoiac-critical method for the viewing of art images is one of its results. A less imaginary approach to the unconscious, more concerned with the signifier and the intractable real, is found in Antonin Artaud. Before Freud, as we know, in France the work of Stéphane Mallarmé, the French symbolists and the poètes maudits was already intensively interrogating a dispossessed, heterogeneous site of speech, notably different from the autonomous “I” of consciousness and autonomy. The most famous example is perhaps Arthur Rimbaud’s persistently quoted line “Je est un autre,” from an 1871 letter where he also writes “c’est faux de dire: ‘Je pense.’ On devrait dire: ‘on me pense.’” This introduction constitutes an articulation of the “Other knowledge” or *savoir* intimately tied to the question of femininity, as that which distinguishes the treatment of the unconscious by the work of these women artists at the turn of the twenty-first century. I discuss this point in detail below.

human states of mind and the unpredictable, tremendous force that is the weather (particularly in Iceland)⁶ subtly removes the human from the spotlight in this poetic field. Bourgeois' *Precious Liquids* (1991) also destabilizes human agency, by instead situating the reader at the threshold of a *Cell*—at once a cylindrical enclosure walled by a wooden water barrel where someone could dwell in isolation, as an individual bed frame inside suggests, and a gigantic elementary unit of the organism. An unstable site, the threshold between human and molecular scales prompts a mode of deciphering that implicates the viewer's body. Smith's *Untitled* (1986) and *Untitled* (1987-90) engage the body as a dwelling for its unthought insides: while the viewer stands outside and before the rows of water coolers labeled with twelve names of body fluids, their transparency and emptiness provoke readers, looking at once at surfaces and insides, to reflect upon their reading body as a transient container for these passing fluids. Sophie Calle's *Douleur exquise* (1985-2003), which the final chapter of this dissertation examines, makes room for memory. Calle recreates room 261 of the New Dehli Imperial Hotel (Figure 35), as the central panel of a triptych the reader, taking the protagonist's standpoint, must "flow" or walk through while reading an overwhelming sequence of letters, fragments of narratives, and photographs, in order to know the exquisite pain a woman's romantic rupture unveils.

Experimental Knowledge

⁶ For Horn, Iceland is a privileged location to think about the weather as an impersonal, sublime and treacherous force because, for one, its violence does not compete with social violence, which barely exists, she says. Also, Iceland does not have any trees; its cleared, limited space surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean is all the more directly traversed by weather phenomena related to sudden flows of water or lava, as it is a volcanic territory. "Weather blows roads away or turns them into mud... When the glaciers melt, just a little, the earth trembles to the gushing violence of engorged rivers. Water is thrashed out of the ocean and thrown in the air, whole fields of water are blown out of lakes. ...Rivers can turn into lakes, and so can fields. When a field becomes a lake, it's intimidating just standing near. These instant lakes have properties unpredictable and unmapped. Weather kills here. (...)" (*Roni Horn aka* 170). If the installation form seems controlled against the erratic behavior of the weather in the space of Iceland, the unpredictable nature of weather is still made a part of the work here, and it is set in connection to this mutable, restless force of human states of mind, and with the viewer's status as (unexpected) visitor whose presence transforms the scene. Also, the installation space forces the visitor to contemplate these aspects of place that for the most part go unnoticed under a more practical, survival-gearred attitude. More on the distinction between this and the aesthetic attitude further on.

Whether or not they belong to the installation art genre, each of the texts at stake is importantly about unforeseen experiences of reading, viewing, and dwelling. How does the eye rest or navigate across surfaces of photographed water that presents itself as a text with footnotes? How to read water that overflows the confines of the book, as *Água viva* does in its first and last sentence, water-writing whose living immediacy is such that retention and protention are impossible? How to interpret a novel where, while something pressing and unsaid insists, the characters are traversed by aphasia and amnesia in the way that the sea waves erode the shore and a fire burns down the city again and again? And how to be the spectator of a film whose visual and aural channels short-circuit meaning, and which takes the viewer on a peculiar tour through Paris, along sculptures of female bodies, the river Seine's surface, and the unreadable hieroglyphs on the surface of the obelisk? Moreover, what do these texts do to those who undergo their spell? Each chapter here examines the ways in which these three practices' traditional notions are called into question by the texts, and reveals that the unique modes of performing reading, viewing, and dwelling such texts propose are available through encounters that have the status of a singular experience. "Experience" here, as French has it in its word 'expérience,' is first of all *experimental*, in the strict sense of exteriorization and testing implied in the etymology 'ex-periri-ens,' a testing or trying that with its act of exposure—for instance to the weather or the inside of the body—carries a risk or *peril* ('periri'). If testing is at stake in this procedure, then so is the unknown, whence comes the unforeseen in these works' reading, viewing, and dwelling practices. Second, experience as proposed by these works of art is also fundamentally aesthetic, from 'aisthêsis,' perception through the senses, insofar as it engages the senses, and thought, in unique transmissions of sensations—of ineffability, liquidity, love, desire, now, mortality, exquisite pain, and others yet. Let us say then, that the experience of reading

responds to a *logic of sensation*, and here I adopt Gilles Deleuze's term from his analysis of Francis Bacon's painting, where the philosopher gave a new, rare perspective on aesthetics by closely following the claims and operations the painter's work sets forth to show its own "clinical" (and not only theoretical) knowledge of sensation.⁷ If "logic of sensation" expresses accurately what the writers and artists in this dissertation give access to, it is in part because they intervene in epistemology by making claims to a kind of knowledge that is only available by undergoing the experience of the work, by exposing the reader to a quest—a unique and rigorous research undertaking⁸—for the ineffable. The experience has the status of an event, in the sense of something new and impossible to calculate taking place, striking and thus interrupting the prevailing spatiotemporal, semantic, and affective configurations in which individuals are inscribed.⁹

De la Musique entendue au concert

To return to *Wonderwater*, as a guide to introduce this dissertation's problematic: a serious research project could never do with only one commentator. Providing four copies, each with a different author's annotations, suggests a need or at least a preference for more than just one interpretation to come from the indispensable other into the realm called *Wonderwater*. But what is interpreting? It is up to these annotators to develop answers for these questions born from

⁷ Deleuze's study of Bacon elaborates on the idea of a clinical knowledge of hysteria particular to painting, and suggests a schizophrenic power in music (33-8).

⁸ Another piece in which Deleuze explores the unique logic and knowledge of a work of art is *Proust et les signes*, where he begins by noting that *A la recherche du temps perdu* is above all a rigorous kind of research on time that has its own methods, different from those in philosophy. In this work Deleuze presents the limits of philosophical insight in a direct, aggressive comparison to the methodologies in Proust's masterpiece, regarding knowledge and truth.

⁹ In "The Nature of Language," Heidegger begins by meditating on what it means to "undergo an experience with something;" his answer to this question highlights the unforeseeable and the radical submission as its distinctive traits: "something befalls us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us. (...) we endure it, suffer it, receive it as it strikes us and submits to it. It is this something itself that comes about, comes to pass, happens" (57). For an account of "epiphany" in aesthetic experience as that which gives the latter its status as an event, see Gumbrecht (111-16).

Horn's provocation, and so their own complex engagement with signifiers comes into play.¹⁰ Before plunging into Horn's book, what Bourgeois, Carson, Cixous and Waters already shared, each in their own way, was fiction as a workspace, a space where language acts beyond predetermined reality, so their relation to her collection of titles cannot help but call into existence what until then had none, invited as they are by the title in its reference to that girl known to dwell in Wonderland. What this suggests is that dealing with the opacity in Horn's book—the strange opacity of the almost blank page, of its clear space for the annotator's words to occupy—demands a creative act, and that by no means is interpreting about clarifying what the book's words and phrases mean, but neither is it about illustrating or narrativizing them, for this is not what any of the participants in *Wonderwater* have in mind when engaging with the blank page. Instead, the annotators' response seems much closer to what Mallarmé in his preface to *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* designated as the major influence of his work: “celle de la Musique entendue au concert” (456) ‘that of Music as it is heard at a concert’ (*Selected Poetry and Prose* 106). Strictly speaking, a concert, as *Wonderwater* knows, requires more than one instrument or voice to produce its distinctive multiplicity. Interpreting consists in experimentally performing the text, as musicians would interpret a musical score, each in their

¹⁰ Carson, for instance, is known for her translations of ancient Greek, especially the works of Sappho, but also for her novels, bearing strong traces of Sapphic melancholia. John Waters, on the other extreme, is a film director whose field is the comical, and a contemporary art collector. The signifier ‘water’ permeating the whole book resides also in his last name, which operates as a sort of biographical title. Hélène Cixous, an artist of the signifiers’ unconscious in their multiple homophonic and polysemous possibilities, writes fiction and literary/philosophical criticism in French, and she has also written about Roni Horn's installation *Rings of Clarice Lispector*, inspired, again, by the Brazilian writer's *Água viva*. Louise Bourgeois, whose installation *Precious Liquids* is one of the objects of chapter three, like Horn, is an artist across media, and words are also central to her work, as we will see. Horn's project comments on the singularity of each reading and viewing experience, even within a given historical paradigm of art or literature. In *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, Michael Baxandall points out that it is difficult to know what the viewing public's experience of painting at the time was, because it is scarcely documented, and he interestingly suggests that this fact has to do with how “eccentric” it is “to set down on paper a verbal response to the complex non-verbal stimulations paintings are designed to provide” (24). Further on in his study he explains that the paintings present *only half* of the viewing experience they enabled, like a “base...on which the pious beholder could impose his personal detail, more particular but less structured than what the painter offered” (47), given that age's practices of internal representation in the process of prayer connected to religious painting.

own style and each time unlike any other, that is, introducing the unwritten and the unheard-of into the process of reading as the concert, like a spring or an unfolding stream, takes place.

This is what compels Kiki Smith, for example, to read mythological, biblical, folk and fairy tale characters by etching and sculpting them again and again in always new positions and textures, enacting the kind of interpretation that by repeating does not explain away, but rather endows figures with “a life outside just one version” (Art: 21, “Stories”). Smith is not interested in understanding the stories once and for all; instead, something compels her to retrace and repeat, to rehearse as a way of interpreting. Here Smith etches in aquatint Carroll’s manuscript drawing, letting Alice swim again in her watercolor pool of tears while dragging a caravan of mysterious animals:



Figure 1. Kiki Smith, *Pool of Tears 2 (After Lewis Carroll)* (2000). Etching, aquatint, and drypoint with watercolor additions, plate: 47 ½ x 71 ¾”, sheet: 50 13/16 x 74 ½”. Publisher and printer: Universal Limited Art editions, West Islip and Bay Shore, New York. Edition: 29. Gift of Emily Fisher Landau. © 2011 Kiki Smith. MOMA, New York. 5 November 2011 <http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=77080>

Another example of interpretation according to this logic is Roni Horn’s installation *Rings of Clarice Lispector*, which “answers” *Água viva*’s call, whose writing voice pleads “ouve-me. Ouve meu silêncio” (14) ‘hear me. Hear my silence.’ Horn already sets the example of this kind of interpretative work for the four commentators of *Wonderwater Alice Offshore* in her title’s

playing a resonant twist or variation on the title of Carroll's novel. To 'Wonder' she adds 'water,' the master verb, and subtracts the noun 'land,' thus sending Alice "offshore."

Language Offshore

Here, then, is a story that Horn's variation on *Alice in Wonderland* tells, and which this dissertation's constellation of texts takes off from: as long as Alice remained on the shore, on land, she was surrounded by a realm of fiction all-too reliant on the imaginary effect of signifiers.¹¹ Cast offshore, consequently, Alice experiences the signifier in another element, far less stable, tamable, or graspable than land.¹² Horn says, "you're never looking at water alone. You're looking at water in relation to something. Whether a lake, or a river, or in a glass, you are looking at water in relation to its containment or environment" (*Roni Horn aka Roni Horn* 165). From this angle it could seem as though water were just a metaphor for the signifier's general linguistic operation, insofar as, instead of "being itself," self-contained, it refers to or perhaps offers a reflection of an absent signified in its relation to other contiguous signifiers. But the experience offshore this Alice figure bears is even more complex, a very specific mode of interaction with signifiers, pushing the limits of language and thought. At stake here is an intervention in epistemology. Horn's methodologies are apophatic (the negative procedure to acquire knowledge of God as ineffable, from Greek 'apo-' "off" 'phanisis' "to speak"). They appear in her proliferation of statements in the *Saying Water* (2001) recording, as well as in her compulsive return to "capture" water in photographs of the Thames or "collect" it from the Icelandic glaciers, to develop with the former a wordless *Dictionary of Water* (2000) and with

¹¹ As Bourgeois, Calle, and Smith in particular demonstrate, the incursion beyond the imaginary realm is not incompatible with figuration per se; depending on how it is treated within the work, a figure might take on a dimension that is not only non-figurative and non-narrative, but also non-symbolizable.

¹² As we know, Carroll sends Alice *underground*, and the change of realm indeed entails alterations in language and sense that correspond to that subterranean environment.

the latter a bookless *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* (2007). All of these strategies demonstrate the degree to which netting water is impossible, how language and thought fail.

Horn also says, “Water is always a spiritual presence. (In the company of water I feel in me the presence of things that exceed me.)” And, “Water is always a mysterious presence. (When you look at water you never know what you’re actually looking at.)” (*Saying Water*). To cast Alice offshore, into Wonderwater, is to commit her to excess and to the unknown, to what, like her tears, overflows¹³ the borders (1) of “me,” (2) of inside and outside (since with “water I feel in me... things that exceed me”), and (3) of cognition (which allows us to recognize and define what our senses perceive, “what you are actually looking at”). This “offshore” or “Wonderwater” is a possible name for the locus of the work of art according to this dissertation’s conclusions.

Courants de désir

The work of art ventures offshore, outside language’s general currency, in a search concerned with something this general circulation fails to anchor, something that exceeds representation. A singular *desire*, a force that, as Smith’s aquatint above shows, pulls Alice forward in that body of tears that at once is and is not her, leading the caravan of animals to the unknown. How to approach words within this other milieu? How to attain *Água viva*’s definition of *writing* as “a palavra pescando o que não é palavra” (20) ‘the word fishing for and netting what is not word’? Marguerite Duras’ answer to this question reaffirms the musical model of

¹³ In *L’oeil et l’esprit*, Merleau-Ponty, thinking about the phenomenon of depth in the visible, notices the peculiarity of water as an overflowing substance even when it is contained, for instance, in a pool: “L’eau elle-même, la puissance aqueuse, l’élément sirupeux et miroitant, je ne peux pas dire qu’elle soit *dans* l’espace: elle n’est pas ailleurs, mais elle n’est pas dans la piscine. Elle l’habite, elle s’y matérialise, elle n’y est pas contenue, et si je lève les yeux vers l’écran des cyprès où joue le réseau des reflets, je ne puis contester que l’eau le visite aussi, ou du moins y envoie son essence active et vivante” (70-1). ‘Water itself, the watery power, the syrupy and shimmering element, I cannot say that it is *in* space: it is not elsewhere, but it is not in the pool. It inhabits it, it materializes there, it is not contained, and if I raise my eyes toward the screen of cypresses where the web of reflections plays, I could not deny that the water visits it too, or at least sends there its active and living essence.’

interpretation, when she declares that music is “le divin” ‘the divine,’ which she believes to be only rarely captured in literature. But she finds this exception: “le vent du divin souffle dans les grandes forêts de Racine. Sur les cimes de la grande forêt racinienne. C’est Racine mais pas détaillé, lu, pensé. C’est la musique de Racine. C’est la musique qui parle” (*La vie matérielle* 92-3) ‘the wind of the divine blows across the great forests of Racine. On the peaks of the great Racinian forest. It is Racine but not detailed, read, thought. It is the music of Racine. It is the music that speaks.’ Duras makes this music resonate in her short film *Césarée* (1978), whose ties to the French playwright’s 1670 *Bérénice*—distinguished by Roland Barthes as Racine’s “tragédie de l’aphasie” (*Sur Racine* 98) ‘tragedy of aphasia’—are discussed in chapter three, along with Duras’ 1971 nearly plotless novel *L’amour*. Both of Duras’ pieces feature speech impasses and seashore scenery continuously ruined by the sea’s force, as the elements encircling a *void* into which a woman—Bérénice for *Césarée*, Lol V. Stein for *L’amour*—has disappeared, somewhat in the manner of Alice’s free-fall down the rabbit hole in Carroll’s novel, dragging with her into this hole the signifying function of language.

Duras creates, like Smith in her work with literary figures, by returning again and again to the same scene and the same characters in acts of erosion and reshaping; like Lispector in *Água viva* and Horn in her drawings (see image below), by cutting and rearranging the pieces; like Bourgeois in her *Cells* installation project (see Figures 17 to 21)¹⁴ or like Calle, as chapter four on her *Douleur exquise* will show, by recreating and multiplying *ad nauseam* the affective intensity of a scene beyond meaning.

¹⁴ *Precious Liquids* (1991), the installation discussed in chapter four and that, as mentioned earlier, Bourgeois quotes in her annotation of Roni Horn’s *Wonderwater*, is one of the twenty-seven *Cells* Bourgeois produced between 1987 and 2003.

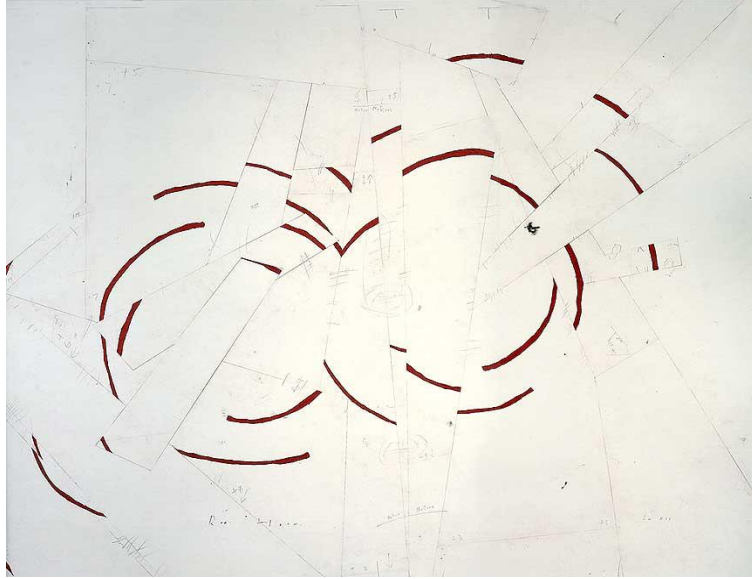


Figure 2. Roni Horn, *So XII* (1998) Pigment and varnish on paper, 37 ½ x 50 3/16". Donald L. Bryant Jr. Family Trust. Photo by Oren Slor. <<http://www.art21.org/images/roni-horn/so-xii-1998>>

All of these processes imply returns across time in repetitions that renew at the cost of wounding the integrity of what has thus far been formed, sometimes drastically dismantling it. Their tactics of repetition and temporal discontinuity operate against the assimilation of the work in the ordinary circulation of language.

In fact, Duras famously posits *destruction* as indispensable to radical creation. Instead of representation and meaning, what writing is concerned with in Duras, as in the other authors' works discussed throughout this dissertation, is:

un mot-trou, creusé en son centre d'un trou... on n'aurait pas pu le dire mais on aurait pu le faire résonner. Immense, sans fin, un gong vide... (*Lol V. Stein* 54)

an absence-word, a hole-word, whose center would have been hollowed out into a hole... It would have been impossible to utter it, but it would have been made to reverberate. Enormous, endless, an empty gong... (*The Ravishing of Lol Stein* 38)

A forceful and irresistible current drives writing to this hole-word, to the non-word that the word fishes for offshore, without any possible return to safe ground, to common sense. The narrator from *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein* speaks the phrases above, as he struggles to articulate the

moment just before Lol V. Stein, a young engaged woman, goes mad when the dawn comes and puts an end to a love scene she had been fascinated by beyond words, between her until-then fiancé and another woman dancing the night away to the orchestra's music in a casino by the beach. This narrator is very insistent upon the fact that Lol loses her mind not out of a sorrow her fiancé could have caused by leaving her for another woman, but from the end of the ecstatic state triggered and upheld by the love scene before her eyes. When it ends, the narrator tells us, Lol screams for a long time (thus placing her voice beyond speech), until she falls silent and henceforth remains that way, as if her silence sheltered and nurtured this unspeakable love, a silence that only a "mot-trou" could put in words. So, on tracing this force in Lol as *amoureuse*, the force that puts her outside or empty of her "self," it becomes evident that its nature is desire. It is exactly the force that also imposes repetition on the creative process. Not, of course, just any desire; instead, one that is immanent to that void in meaning and to the strange pleasure its impossible reading causes, which Duras defines as "le désir absolu."

Devenirs-femme de la lecture

This desire's invariable expression through feminine personae in Duras is far from arbitrary; it points, rather, to something specific and intrinsic to the desire and pleasure that propel the work of art according to the pieces examined in this dissertation. In the same way, while sexual difference and femininity are notable in the works examined here, whether the artists whose works are at stake are female in biological or sociological terms is not at the core of the questions their works deal with. At the most, their gender can be an advantage to enter into the work of art's singular relation with the signifier. In other words, "being a girl" can assist Alice to successfully go "offshore"—a realm that not only escapes signification but also *being*, understood as a sedentary ground of self-possession. In this respect my argument is informed by

Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's concept of *becoming-woman*, which endows their broader aesthetic theories of creation and desire with a dimension that stands in close proximity to the stakes these works of art themselves raise, particularly when becoming-woman's remarkable connection to what Jacques Lacan called *feminine jouissance* is considered.

To ontology, to its axiom "Being is the master verb," Deleuze and Guattari oppose the order of *becoming*, and its unmistakable trace can be distinguished from that of being for an important shift in emphasis to think movement: being posits at least two stable points between which a movement occurs, such that becoming is subordinated to at least two entities in a teleological way, favoring the proposition "a girl becomes a woman," whereas becoming, approached in and for itself—where "a becoming-woman" is a noun for which an indefinite singular article is appropriate because each becoming constitutes an event—reveals a nomadic, *fluid* field of unstoppable forces irreducible to origin and end, a field always assailed by the unknown, always producing unexpected connections of heterogeneous elements. Deleuze and Guattari call it "une joie immanente au désir" (*MP* 192) 'a joy immanent to desire.' The two thinkers discuss several becomings in *Mille Plateaux* and elsewhere (Francis Bacon's painting, for example, features a becoming-animal according to Deleuze's *Logique de la sensation*). But if "le devenir-femme... [c]'est la clef des autres devenirs" (340) 'the becoming-woman... is the key to the other becomings' it is due to a relationship to the body untamed by the organism as the coherent physical support of identity. This disruptive body traversed by "le flux du désir lui-même" (*Mille plateaux* 173) 'the flow of desire itself,' is what they call, after Antonin Artaud, a *Corps sans organes* or 'Body without organs.' Despite the attacks psychoanalysis is subject to throughout their *Capitalisme et schizophrénie* project, a closer look at the roles of desire, "micro-féminité," and signs in a line of flight to a "régime asignifiant" 'a-signifying regime,' reveals

points of convergence with Jacques Lacan's original reading of Freud regarding drive, *das Ding* 'the Thing,' and feminine sexuality.

La couleur désir

Femininity offers a privileged perspective for the aesthetic experience that the works of art explored here open onto, under the constraints of a strange pleasure in this void in meaning. Pleasure, for Duras, along with its correlative void, is bound to *seeing*—as the other mode of contagion or transmission of that “*désir absolu*,” in addition to what she calls music. Her decision to film and, before that, write for the screen is primordially based on this link. While the leap across media, from writing to cinema, does indicate that a point of exhaustion has been reached in words alone, its purpose is far from supplementing through other sensory channels what could be lacking in the verbal one. Just as Horn's treatment of language is not extrinsic to the plastic work, so Duras' work with the camera is indissociable from writing and its unique treatment of the word:

Tu te souviens du visage de Delphine, les yeux clairs, elle regarde une couleur, elle dit le nom d'une couleur: violette. C'est la lumière du Delta... Tu vois, pour moi, c'est le cinéma, ça. Tu montres un visage très rose, beau, les yeux clairs, clairs, clairs, presque blancs, nacrés, tu vois, et tu dis qu'elle regarde une couleur violette. Alors le mot “violet” envahit tout. Et c'est la couleur du plan. La couleur du plan, c'est la couleur du mot. (*La couleur des mots* 100)

You remember Delphine's face, the light-colored eyes, she looks at a color, she says the name of a color: violet. It is the light of the Delta... You see, for me, cinema is that. You show a very pink face, beautiful, the eyes light, light, light, almost white, you see, and you say that she looks at a violet color. Then the word 'violet' invades everything. And it is the color of the shot. The color of the shot, is the color of the word.

Duras provides this didactic explanation of the relation between the visual and verbal components in her work in discussion about her film *India Song* (1975) with Bruno Nuytten (the film's cinematographer), at the end of an interview led by Dominique Noguez. In the passage, the actress's looking eyes (Delphine) give an image to the contraction—as one would contract a

disease—of something infinitely subtle: Duras will call it desire or love, an objectless desire, or one whose object is but a color, the color of the (Ganges) Delta's light, a color that in this case cannot be transmitted by simply presenting an image of the body of water in question on the screen, and so needs to migrate onto the word pronounced by this woman who we see beholding it, experiencing it. What is striking about Duras' last sentence here is its final spin on the poetic dynamics of speech and light, since the shot, invaded by the word "violet," makes visible not a word, but the word's violet color in a dimension that remains beyond symbolization.¹⁵

A guaranty of sanity

On the one hand, Lol V. Stein gains access to this strange site of silence, music, and the divine, at the cost of madness; moreover, this site, which the texts at stake here propose as the locus of the work of art, stands beyond common signification, meaning, sense, and it forces the reader to bathe in and grapple with a-signifying, meaningless, nonsensical voids. How, on the other hand, can Louise Bourgeois insistently mold, draw, and weave onto the surface of certain pieces of hers the affirmation "Art is a guaranty of sanity"?

¹⁵ Through cinema, Duras offers an extraordinary resolution to two opposing views on the arts' engagement with unspeakable: On the one hand, Kandinsky in *Du spirituel dans l'art, et dans la peinture en particulier* adopts and develops Henri Matisse's notion of painting as an action that can "rendre le divin" 'deliver the divine' (92), which leads him to a meditation on color: "Les tons des couleurs, comme ceux de la musique, sont d'une nature beaucoup plus fine, provoquant dans l'âme des vibrations beaucoup plus subtiles, indescriptibles par des mots. Avec le temps chaque ton pourra vraisemblablement trouver un mot matériel pour l'exprimer, mais il subsistera toujours quelque chose de plus que les mots n'épuiseront pas, et qui ne sera pas un accessoire, un superflu luxueux du ton, mais son essence même" (164). 'The tones in colors, like those in music, are of a much finer nature, producing in the soul much more subtle vibrations, indescribable by words. In time each tone will presumably find a material word to express it, but something that is more than words can exhaust will always persist, and it will not be an accessory, a luxurious surplus of the tone, but its very essence.' On the other hand, in his lectures *On the Nature of Language*, Heidegger picks out the last stanza from Stefan George's poem *The Word*: "So I renounced and sadly see: / Where word breaks off no thing may be." And he explains: "the poet has experienced that only the word makes a thing appear as the thing it is, and thus lets it be present. The word avows itself to the poet as that which holds and sustains a thing in its being. The poet experiences an authority, a dignity of the word than which nothing vaster and loftier can be thought. ... The poet experiences his poetic calling as a call to the word as the source, the bourn of Being" (65-6).

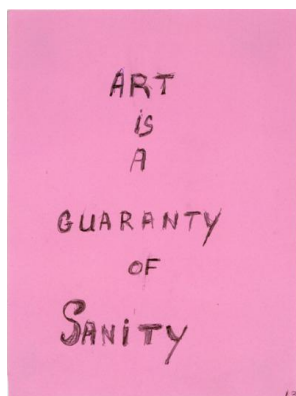


Figure 3. Louise Bourgeois, *Art is a Guaranty of Sanity* (2000) Pencil on pink paper, 27.9 x 21.5 cm. ©2000 Louise Bourgeois Trust. Collection Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Christopher Burke. <<http://arttattler.com/commentarybourgeois.html>>

From what this introduction has stated thus far it would seem that, to the contrary, art in this “experimental” sense seems to carry the risk of driving one insane. So let us more closely examine Bourgeois’ proposition. Defining art as a “guaranty”¹⁶ first of all implies an agency in art, that art somehow does, acts, or effects, doing so out of a sense of obligation; that, specifically, this act of art guarantees, constituting a “ground or basis of security”; and that this act involves “a written or other undertaking,” “something” to “ensure the existence or persistence of a[nother] thing,” in this case sanity. The work, the undertaking of art, then, is this written “something.” According to the phrase, sanity is not in and of itself guaranteed. “Sanity” recalls a medical, psychiatric and psychological context. In this sentence “sanity” appears as a fragile and not autonomously certified or preserved condition of the mind, and it introduces, between the mind and art, a link each of the authors in this dissertation assumes, that is, implies and commits to.

¹⁶ The Oxford English Dictionary offers two current uses for this synonym of ‘guarantee’ and ‘warranty’: 1. The action or an act of securing, warranting, or guaranteeing; security, warranty; *spec.* a written undertaking made by a person (called the *guarantor*) to be answerable for the payment of a debt or the performance of an obligation by another person, who is in the first instance liable to such payment or obligation. 3. Something which secures or guarantees the existence or persistence of a thing; a ground or basis of security. Bourgeois might prefer the less common ‘guaranty’ over ‘guarantee’ for symmetry, having the same suffix as ‘sanity;’ ‘guaranty’ is also more ambiguous than ‘warranty,’ applied in a wide range of legal situations.

But how do they understand “the mind”? Is the sane mind necessarily tied to the “I” as the agent and master of itself? Bourgeois also comments, in Horn’s book: “À Cause De Mes Sept Orifices/ L’Évacuation Bat Son Plein” (151) ‘Because of My Seven Orifices/Evacuation in Full Swing’ (169).¹⁷ Another force of attraction than the coherent and contained self is accredited here, and it makes conceivable a rare function of the “I.” Bourgeois ends this poem or sketch of the body relinquishing self-preservation: “Je Suis Vraiment Une Maison/ Dans Laquelle/ Je Peux Faire Le Vide” (151) ‘I Am Really a House/ In Which/ I Can Make Room’ (169). “Faire le vide dans son esprit” is a common expression in French that would translate as emptying or clearing one’s mind, for instance as a way of preparing for a situation that requires complete attention. But Bourgeois’ image of the body emptied of its flows instead connotes a loss of control over the organism’s sphincters and a dispossession. A particular knowledge and treatment of “the mind,” evidently different than a psychiatric one, must be at stake if art is in play.

Perhaps Lol’s “madness” and Bourgeois’ “sanity” are not conceptually opposed to one another. As I said, *Le ravissement* stages the “arrachement de Lola Valérie Stein d’elle-même” (*La couleur* 65) ‘wrenching of Lola Valérie Stein from her self’ as a consequence of beholding love or absolute desire—“l’invivable de la vie” (65) ‘the unlivable in life’; her “madness” is the result of contracting this love, of undergoing an experience of desire—or “rapture”—that thereafter dispossesses her of her self in a profound sense; the narrator of the Lol case tells us that the slow recovery following the traumatic scene is only apparent. Although she eventually marries and has children, she can no longer *live*—give symbolic weight to her life—according to the social norms assigned to her, and this is manifest in her compulsive, solitary strolls about the city, following strangers and paths that lead nowhere each afternoon, completely absorbed and

¹⁷ English translations by are provided at the end of *Wonderwater*.

detached from the familiar housewife role. These erratic behaviors, the lines they write on the city's surface, are difficult to decipher; the narrator in Duras' novel is in fact a character who tries to do so, a researcher captivated by the enigma she, *Lol V. Stein*, embodies. In any case, what becomes clear to the narrator and readers is that they respond to the logic of the desire that has forever overwritten her life.

By no means does Bourgeois' 'sanity' refer to being delivered from a state of mind such as Lol's; the sanity art guarantees in Bourgeois' and the other artists' work here is nothing like a return to the normality Lol has come loose from. Sophie Calle's *Douleur exquise*, for instance, proposes the work as a kind of therapeutic treatment for a pain caused by a rip in the fantasy of communication, the fantasy of sexual relation. But within the constraints of the work, healing has to be something entirely different from stitching this fantastic veil back to a seamless appearance; it must uphold to the point of exhaustion the unsymbolizable dimension of pain, the sensation's "exquisiteness." And in this fundamental difference from psychiatry regarding the social link and its way of configuring bodies, desire, language, art sets forth an ethics where room is made for "désir absolu," for this "Vide" 'Void' and "mot-trou" 'hole-word' to speak its own language, however strange. Art can only guarantee sanity by an obscure, repetitive writing, like Lol's paths; but as we have seen through the *Wonderwater* experiment and through the questions of reading these works of art set forth, it is not just the author or artist, but the reader who, by submitting to the strange paths offshore in order to explore this writing of feminine desire, writes.

The Aesthetic and Satisfaction

In their language experiments with “saying water,” presenting the “color of the word,” “fishing for and netting the non-word,” or in their provocation to think *extimacy*¹⁸ through the body’s fluids and through an experience of the threshold between inside and outside (the fundamental binary structuring thought), the examples presented thus far point to important interventions the work of art can make in epistemology, ontology, ethics, and aesthetics. According to these works, an aesthetic experience brings the reader’s desire into play. That which the reader can know hinges upon a open disposition toward a field where signifiers flicker and create a web that each time uniquely highlights and upholds the void in meaning. Upon accessing this field, which I call a poetic one for the kind of operation with signifiers it entertains, the reader’s being becomes profoundly implicated in this web and irreversibly transformed by the reading process itself. As a description of the aesthetic experience, this account, which emerges from the specific practices of writing and reading the works of art here imply, speaks to the position Immanuel Kant secures for the subject (of reason) in the aesthetic judgment by standing completely at odds with it, since in Kant the subject’s autonomy is never compromised, no matter how spectacularly the faculty of imagination may fail to represent the dynamically sublime confronting the subject.

Kant’s groundbreaking work on the aesthetic includes key elements to consider the relation we have been tracing—between desire, knowledge, and the limits of the thinkable—as a question of aesthetics. Pleasure, he claims, is the “sensation of satisfaction” (“Critique of the Aesthetic” §1) correlative to aesthetic judgments, a sensation that “enlivens... the powers of the mind,” in the aesthetic judgment of taste. The beautiful “directly brings with it a feeling of the promotion of life,” whereas the sublime brings an indirect pleasure, “generated... by a

¹⁸ On this neologism, see Lacan’s *Ethics* (167).

momentary inhibition of the vital powers, and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them” (“Analytic of the Aesthetic” §23). The sublime is thus a negative pleasure stemming from displeasure in the mind that feels threatened or moved by something excessive. The sublime’s dramatic effect over the feeling of life, satisfaction, or pleasure results from confronting the mind with representations either too large (in the mathematically sublime) or too powerful (in the dynamically sublime) to imagine, let alone perceive, and which are therefore only conceivable by reason, an exclusive power of the mind. While a feeling of the dynamically sublime may be prompted by images of nature/God in all its might (thunder, for instance), Kant’s aesthetic credits reason in the end, an immutable reason that preceded the encounter with the sublime image, and leaves behind the materialities inciting this displeasure that becomes pleasure by only according a secondary role to the senses.

Conversely, the aesthetic experience the work proposes in this dissertation implies a profound alteration of the individual who enters its constraints, and even the production of an unprecedented reader, since the practice of reading is conceived anew by the work. Pleasure and displeasure in the reading process follow what was earlier called, with Marguerite Duras, “le désir absolu,” and as was noted, this desire entails a pleasure in the meaningless void. This pleasure, once again, is not concerned with covering up this void, and neither are these artists’ insistent returns to it an attempt at retrieving it for reason. In other words, repetition indicates that for them, the pleasure and displeasure of the aesthetic are situated beyond the principle of satisfaction, where Kant’s development tries to keep sensations, since in this mode they can better support the subject of reason in its “suprasensible vocation,” and also respond to the interest of communicability of these judgments despite their non-objective criterion (“Critique” §39).

Kant's system brought aesthetic feeling into its account of the subject, putting it in the position of a spectator of nature and art. This perspective was consistent with and delimited by Kant's own previous critical developments on the subject, particularly its epistemological function in the first *Critique*, where the spatiotemporally determined subject¹⁹ relates to representations of the world as object of knowledge. In his incisive attack on asceticism, however, Nietzsche disapproved of this approach to aesthetics:

Kant like all philosophers, instead of viewing the aesthetic issue from the side of the artist, envisaged art and beauty solely from the "spectator's" point of view, and so, without himself realizing it, smuggled the "spectator" into the concept of beauty. But if only the philosophers of the beautiful had been sufficiently familiar with this "spectator," that is, as a great *personal* fact and *experience* [my emphasis], as an abundance of the most powerful, *intense experiences, desires* [my emphasis], surprises, and delights in the domain of the beautiful! But the opposite has, as I feared, always been the case... (*Genealogy of Morals* 83)

Of course Kant's positing of a reflexive judgment constitutes a welcoming gesture toward a dimension of the subject's life that cannot be accounted for in the strict terms of epistemology he lays out, for which a determinative judgment applies. While this other, aesthetic dimension does not count as knowledge of the world, it is endowed with a subjective power; it offers a learning experience by presenting the subject to itself.²⁰ What Nietzsche criticizes is the distance Kant preserves to protect the autonomy and identity of the individual against the disruptive powers of the beautiful, by making the beautiful harmless, as it were, and only related to desire as, at most, "the symbol of the morally good" ("Critique" §59).

What Nietzsche considers worst of all, then, is the criterion Kant puts forth of "disinterest" in the experience of the beautiful, and so he compares his definition of beauty grounded on this attitude to one by Stendhal:

¹⁹ On the import of space and time as the sensible conditions of all experience, as Kant's contribution for the possibility of an aesthetics that precedes epistemology, see Shaviro.

²⁰ This is no minor operation in the Kantian subject for, as Lyotard points out in his *Leçons*, the aesthetic judgment holds the key to critical thought in general.

“That which pleases without interest,” Kant has said, “is beautiful.” Disinterest! Compare this definition to that offered by a genuine ‘spectator’ and artist—Stendhal, who once described the beautiful as *une promesse de bonheur*. Here, in any case, the very aspect of the aesthetic condition which Kant emphasized—*le désintéressement*—rejected and crossed out. Who is right, Kant or Stendhal? (83)

For Nietzsche, the beauty of Stendhal’s definition is in its affirmative stance to “sexual interest” (329) or voluptuous feeling, against an ascetic criterion in which the pleasure beauty yields is removed from the body.

If our estheticians admittedly never tire of arguing, on Kant’s behalf, that under the spell of beauty it is possible to contemplate *even* statues of naked women ‘without interest,’ one is entitled to have a little laugh at their expense. (84)

Why this fear, Nietzsche wonders, of voluptuousness and the body’s eroticism as a realm of sensations also relevant to the aesthetic? If we follow Nietzsche on the importance of a shift of perspective to think the aesthetic, away from the judging spectator’s disengaged position and toward the “abundance of the most powerful, intense *experiences*,” we find that, even if he suggests that the aesthetician take the perspective of the artist, the figure of a subject of this experience cannot be simply equated with the individual. For the latter only reflects the Apollinean side or “dream realm” of the vision of art he draws from Greek tragedy; the other side—formless, imageless, rhythmic, intoxicating, Dionysiac—features the moment when the artist “become[s] a *work of art*” (*Birth of Tragedy* 24), which requires “the abrogation of the *principium individuationis*” (26).²¹ When the two sides or powers operate together, Nietzsche calls this abrogation of the principle of individuation “an aesthetic event” (26).

This event, as Nietzsche calls the result of two interlacing forces—dream and frenzy—beyond ordinary or “waking life” (32) or beyond the realm where pleasure and displeasure are neutral, in the works of art explored here targets the unconscious as a less tractable site of the

²¹ And this is precisely what the CsO, the *Corps sans Organes* or body without organs, relinquishes, as Bourgeois’ poem on creating the void “par mes sept orifices” asserts.

subject. As said earlier in relation to the stakes of experience and the logic of sensation, the event and its novelty have to do with the possibility of transmissions of sensations at the expense of meaning and the coherence of the organism. And these two things are exactly what the spectator Nietzsche attacks cannot relinquish. For this reason, the spectator Kant posits for the aesthetic clings to what Freud designated as the pleasure principle, always seeking to maintain the lowest levels of stimulation, in service of the coherent organism or “*principium individuationis*.” Instead, Nietzsche affirms, to go through the domain of the beautiful is to be confronted by an “abundance of... desires, surprises, delights”: which implies for the work of arts examined here an excess that escapes satisfaction, a *jouissance*.

As an articulation of what Nietzsche’s domain of the beautiful entails, Blanchot’s description of “la parole de l’art et de la littérature” (49) ‘the voice/speech of art and literature’ discloses the perils of the place from which Kant and others safeguard the spectator of the aesthetic:

lieu où le langage est encore relation sans pouvoir, langage du rapport nu, étranger à toute maîtrise et à toute servitude, langage qui parle aussi seulement à qui ne parle pas pour avoir et pour pouvoir, pour savoir et pour posséder, pour devenir maître et se maîtriser, c’est-à-dire à un homme fort peu homme. (49)

a place where language is still a relation without power, language of naked relation, foreign to all mastery and all slavery, language that speaks also only to who does not speak to have and be able, to know and to possess, to become master and master oneself, that is to say to a man who is not much of a man.

That the artist’s authentic entry into the domain of the beautiful or literary space is presented in terms of emasculation is a symptom of the longstanding masculine perspective in positing a subject of the aesthetic. And yet, because of its connotations of self-mastery and possession in a patriarchal civilization, it is not the most efficient one where a serious engagement with the domain of the beautiful is concerned. The shift from spectator to artist, from artist to work of art,

with its implicated move from satisfaction to drive as this unbound excess, is crucial for Bourgeois, Calle, Duras, Horn, Lispector, and Smith, who in addition to giving agency to the work of art as a way of thinking the aesthetic,²² make room in singular ways for an eminently sexual dimension, that of sexual difference, bound to the non-representable²³ and to the failure of communication.

Il n'y a d'intersubjectivité qu'artistique

How are transmissions of sensations possible if the failure of communication is at stake in the search the work of art puts the reader through? Earlier I advanced that in its “treatment for pain,” Sophie Calle’s *Douleur Exquise* points out and addresses the question of impossible communication and sexual relation, and it is strictly related to the problematic of reading as an experience, and therefore to the Other knowledge it gives way to. I will conclude this introduction with a closer look at this example. A multimedia narrative, this piece recounts an apparently banal and commonplace story: the romantic rupture its protagonist suffers in a hotel room, where her lover, who has stood her up, breaks up with her through the phone in this room. This empty room is recreated as an installation that forms the work’s centerpiece, which the reader enters, standing in for the female protagonist and in this sense plunging in, as close as possible, to her position. The image of the empty bed and the telephone confronts such a reader

²² Before philosophy embraced in the twentieth century this turn Nietzsche called for, for instance with Heidegger, Adorno, and Merleau-Ponty, painters such as Cézanne (probably the most frequent example for French critics) or Kandinsky proposed to listen to what painting (and the other arts with its material singularities) itself “thinks.” In his 1909 *Du spirituel dans l’art, et dans la peinture en particulier* he writes: “la pulsation de l’artiste ne s’entend plus dans l’oeuvre, cette dernière vit avec ses propres pulsations” (93). And Cézanne “pense en peinture” (in Merleau-Ponty 68) ‘thinks in painting,’ rather than words, he himself explains.

²³ When Lacan rethinks Freud’s concept of sublimation he points to Heidegger’s vase from his essay *The Origin Of the Work of Art*. The latter’s contribution on creation with emptiness that puts forth (dis)closure through the example of the vase, is further explored when Lacan shows how this emblem of the act of creation rising from or grappling with nothing (‘*ex-nihilo*’) represents the “façonnement du signifiant et l’introduction dans le réel d’une béance, d’un trou” (*Ethique* 146) ‘fashioning of the signifier, and the introduction of a gap in the real, of a hole.’ And it is this “béance,” “trou” or “mot-trou” that not only do the artists in question here fashion as an object of art or Thing, in an act of sublimation, but make the matter of a transmission that takes place in the experience of reading.

with *her* experience—a feminine experience— emblemizing the impossibility of communication and sexual relation at the heart of desire, beneath the love fantasy of overcoming the distance separating two lovers (whose narrative preceded this moment in *Douleur exquise*). Through the work of art, this realization is raised, from the casual and contingent disappointment in the other that the next love relation can cure, to the status of a learning experience, a kind of knowledge inscribed in sexual difference. What does this knowledge mean? But this knowledge resides, precisely, beyond meaning, insofar as meaning responds to a phallic economy of the signifier, upheld by the claim to universality (which Kant’s elaboration on the aesthetic insists upon). Instead, the order of the singular (though not the one) is in force here, in its relation to the Other as Other, that is, outside meaning.

To heal from this heartbreak, the last third of the work collects narratives from some ninety different protagonists, of the most painful experience in their lives, which the protagonist of *Douleur exquise* pairs with variations on her own story and the unvarying photograph of the hotel room where the narrator encountered her own exquisite pain (Figs. 45, 46, and 47). By making that singular moment of pain into the origin of the work, and by demonstrating its intractable nature—through the strategy of repetition—and the limits of its verbal communicability—through the strategy of comparison to the other profoundly subjective stories—Calle’s piece confronts the reader with the impossibility of generalizing pain, no matter how frequently the figure of a lost loved one reappears throughout the narratives. But all at once, because this confrontation only occurs within the “clinical” process of reading (and not simply in theory or at a spectator’s critical distance) a unique sensation of this excess that escapes or floods meaning, a (dis)pleasure or “douleur exquise” is transmitted along the way.

The possibility of this other link, of a telephone connecting to the other as other, is a wager of the works of art this dissertation explores. An ethical import is thus implied in the desire for a reader where a becoming-woman or feminine relation to the unconscious and language are called for. Just as Lacan in his seminar on feminine sexuality stated “il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel” ‘there is no sexual relation,’ Deleuze, as reader of Proust, once affirmed “il n’y a d’intersubjectivité qu’artistique” (*Proust* 55). Only through art, he thinks with Proust, is there access to what the latter defines as “savoir ce que voit un autre de cet univers qui n’est pas le même que le nôtre et dont les paysages nous seraient restés aussi inconnus que ceux qu’il peut y avoir dans la Lune” (*Proust* 55) “know what another sees of this universe, what is not the same as ours and whose landscapes would have remained as unknown to us as those that might be on the moon.” Only through art, where reading constitutes an experience that indeed puts one through an unknown universe, where Alice goes offshore, is a sanity of desire following its own course guaranteed. If for Proust the aesthetic experience of art gives way to knowing the unknown universe of another, in the works by Bourgeois, Calle, Duras, Horn, Lispector, and Smith, the *recherche* leads to a *savoir* of the ineffable, of what Lispector calls “o atrás do pensamento” ‘the behind meaning’ as poetic, aquatic dwelling space. It is to this space that the following chapters are devoted to.

CHAPTER ONE

For *Now* We See Through A Glass, Brightly: *Água viva* and Roni Horn's Water

O que falo é puro presente e este livro é uma linha reta no espaço. É sempre atual, é o fotómetro de uma máquina fotográfica se abre e imediatamente fecha, mas guardando si o flash. Mesmo que eu diga “vivi” ou “vivirei” é presente porque eu os digo já.
Água viva

Dans la fraction de seconde que dure la plus courte perception possible de lumière, des trillions de vibrations ont pris place, dont la première est séparée de la dernière par un intervalle énormément divisé. (...) *Nous ne percevons, pratiquement, que le passé*, le présent pur étant l'insaisissable progrès du passé rongeant l'avenir.
Henri Bergson, Matière et Mémoire

In a 1980s lecture devoted to the problem of reading Clarice Lispector's 1973 book *Água viva*, Hélène Cixous suggested a link with the Kantian analytic of the beautiful, as read by Jacques Derrida's in “Le *sans* de la coupure pure:¹ “We can work on the following question of aesthetic judgment in Clarice: What is the beautiful? What does it mean (to say)? All this in relation to *Água viva*” (Cixous, “Foreword” xiv).² By proposing to relate these questions from Kant's third *Critique* to *Água viva*, and by questioning the latter's readability within an ordinary reading practice as initial approach to the text, Cixous begins to disclose the text's own claim on the aesthetic. This chapter's aim is to develop it in detail, emphasizing how it overturns metaphysical axioms. Cixous' analysis is framed by the ‘sans’: without finality, without end. According to her account, the encounter of the text as beautiful object *sans-telos* and *sans-*concept has, indeed, to do with the work's call for a new way of reading altogether. And yet, if the free play of the faculties operative in the judgment of the beautiful provided the necessary model for the reading subject's disposition towards Lispector's text, then displacing reading

¹‘The *sans* of the pure cut.’ See “Parergon” *La vérité en peinture. The Truth in Painting*.

² Conley translates “qu'est-ce qu'il *veut dire*?” as “what does it mean?” I am inserting “to say” in parenthesis in following Bennington and McLeod's translation of this locution in Derrida's *Truth in Painting*. Cixous also discusses *Água viva* in her *Reading with Clarice Lispector*.

from where thought is interested in knowing, to a kind of passivity that yields strictly pleasure would suffice to fulfill the need of another readership.

While distance from epistemic agency is truly fundamental to meet this text in its literary space, I believe that the singularity of its aesthetic force calls for a more extreme event of thought than the Kantian reflective subject as reader. The uncharted nature of that event and its effect upon the work of art are the questions orienting this chapter. This interlacing of a literary text that is photographic and abstractly painterly, with photographs and installations that constitute an embodiment of word and text, explores the work's power to set forth its own stakes and confront the branch of philosophy called aesthetics with the limits of language.³

Part one introduces the paradoxical logic of water that Clarice Lispector and Roni Horn set forth, on which the notions of the work of art and the aesthetic event are based. Next, it demonstrates the critique of metaphysical presence implicit in *Água viva*'s own conception of the event, as a "now" created in the space of writing, of the work of art. This space's difference from language as the regime of definitions and determinations is analyzed in connection to first principles theories in Pre-socratic philosophy. An analysis of Horn's installation *Rings of Clarice Lispector* illuminates the unique practice of reading that *Água viva* calls for, and highlights the importance of installation art in both authors' approach to aesthetic experience.

Part two draws a connection to negative theology as an intertext to *Água viva*. By tracing the latter's displacement of the mystical tradition, I explore the question of desire as fundamental

³ In *La vérité en peinture* Derrida observes the logocentrism of philosophical inquiries into art: "en se demandant ce que veut dire « art », on soumet la marque « art » à un régime d'interprétation très déterminé, survenu dans l'histoire : il consiste, en sa *tautologie* sans réserve, à interroger le vouloir-dire de toute oeuvre dite d'art, même si sa forme n'est pas le dire. On se demande ainsi ce que veut dire une œuvre plastique ou musicale en soumettant toutes les productions à l'autorité de la parole et des arts «discursifs »" (26). "...by asking what 'art' means (to say), one submits the mark 'art' to a very determined regime of interpretation which has supervened in history: it consists, in its *tautology* without reserve, in interrogating the *vouloir-dire* of every work of so-called art, even if its form is not that of saying. In this way one wonders what a plastic or musical work means (to say), submitting all productions to the authority of speech and the 'discursive' arts" (22). Earl Fitz includes a Derridean critique of language in his analysis of Lispector's texts in "Lispector and the 'Writing' of Poststructuralism."

for and to aesthetic experience. Through Horn's ongoing *River Thames* photographic projects, and finally the semi-permanent installation in Stykkishólmur, Iceland, *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* (2007), I show the connection of this desire to a particular kind of reader that is necessary for the "now" to give way to an encounter "atrás to pensamento" 'behind thought': the very marrow of the event.

PART ONE

As artist and as reader of *The Stream of Life*, Roni Horn addresses the matter of aesthetics in creating an installation that proposes a new experience of reading *Água viva* to its viewers. *Rings of Clarice Lispector (Água Viva)* (2004) scatters a collection of fragments from the English translation *The Stream of Life* on yellow rubber floor tiles that cover a room from wall to wall.⁴



Figure 4. *Rings of Clarice Lispector* (detail). ©2011 Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Hauser & Wirth London, Piccadilly.

The orange word-streams printed in capitalized Futura Bold font draw an array of curves and spirals on the floor, laid out in segments independent from the punctuation marks in the book.

⁴ The layout varies according to the space where the floor is set up. My discussion is based on the installation at the Hauser & Wirth Gallery in Piccadilly, London (17 November-23 December 2004).

Flowing in different directions, instead of all lining up from left to right, visitors encounter phrases such as “The world has no visible order/ And I have only the order/ Of breathing/ I let myself/ Happen.”; “...to bring the future into the now. I move within my deepest instincts that carry themselves out, blindly./ I feel then that I’m close to fountains, lakes, and waterfalls,/ all of abundant waters. And I am free.” Sometimes the letter stream changes direction within a single figure, forcing the viewer’s eyes to move more than one way along the words in order to go through the fragment.

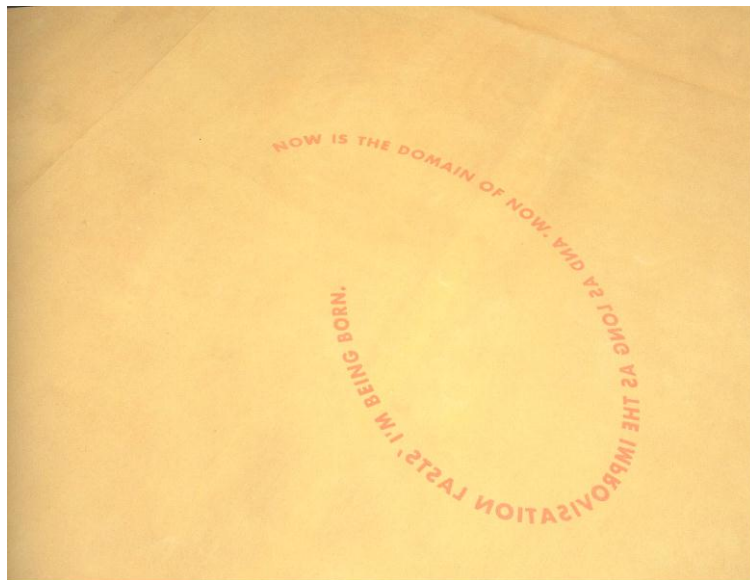


Figure 5. *Rings* (Now is the domain of Now...) Hauser & Wirth Zürich London. *Rings of Lispector* (Água Viva). Göttingen: Hauser & Wirth Steidl, 2005. 95.

In these gestures, *Rings* performs and at once proposes to its visitor a particular reading of *Água Viva*. By turning readers into visitors walking on and along the winding phrases, *Rings* prompts them to think, for instance, about their encounter with the text from the perspective of a full and physical entry into its field.

One such visitor is in fact Hélène Cixous, who thus returns to the Lispectorian text more than a decade later. After the reading adventure through the installation, she accounts for her experience by casting off from ‘sans’ again, but in other terms than those of the beautiful:

Sans me toucher, parce qu'elles se retirent, parce qu'elles s'allègent les Rings of Lispector me touchent autrement: elles me font sentir la fugacité, l'insaisissable de la pensée, elles me font voir l'invisible en train de se produire. (Cixous, "Faire voir" 46)
Without touching me, because they withdraw, because they lighten, the Rings of Lispector touch me in another way: they make me feel the rapidity, the ungraspable part of thought, they make me see the invisible as it makes itself invisible. ("See the neverbeforeseen" 46)

Rings allows Cixous to "reframe" the reading that *Água viva* calls forth, as a matter far beyond pleasurable suspension of epistemic interest: there where thought's ungraspable is felt and where this sensibility makes it possible to see the invisible become so. As a matter of the "ungraspable part of thought" and of a desire for something impossible manifested by the text, a reading at the limits of language and meaning is at stake. It is not the Kantian sublime; rather, the text introduces an experience close to negative theology (see part two).

Rings bind Horn's plastic oeuvre and Lispector's writing in terms of "the matter of the work," the movements it performs. As Horn's pieces containing words usually do, *Rings* foregrounds the visual and rhythmic dimension of phrases, while playing with the temporality of reading and the relationship of reader to space. The installation conjoins the operations of seeing, reading, hearing and walking. We can say, on the one hand, that this artwork rejects an appointment of the artist's will as its sovereign creator not only because it gives the other agency over its realization, but also because, as we know, it is created through reading another author's composition. Is it subjected to *Água viva*'s law, then? Only insofar as it executes the text's last sentence: "O que te escrevo continua e estou enfeitiçada" (87) 'What I write to you continues and I am spellbound'. *Rings* has thus taken on the "you" *Água viva* summons, and allows what the spellbound voice writes to continue beyond the last page of the text, letting it migrate onto the rubber floor in English.

Springing from the *Água viva* source, *Rings of Lispector* remains, all at once, responsive to creation as the artwork's task. Thus, *Rings* cannot be in mere subordination to *Água viva*. This already indicates a transformation of the concept of reading, since the artwork does invent a way of reading the text at the same time that it accepts its connection to it. One does not contradict the other. If, instead of a work of art, *Rings* were a "direct" explication of *Água viva* (and then it is difficult to imagine its title remaining *Rings*, these peripheral objects) claiming to have decoded and clarified its meaning, it would break the flow of the spellbound voice, and, without the spell, it would not be reading "living water *itself*" anymore. Unconcerned by hermeneutic intentions, Horn's sculptural work with literary texts advances a sense of transposition and a poetic nomadism; about her *Dickinson* sculptures (featuring fragments of Emily Dickinson's poems) she claims: "While these objects speak the poems, they do not represent them. They are them" (*Earths Grow Thick* 80). Sculpture subjects itself to the becoming-spatial of a poem. The same happens to *Água viva* with *Rings*: never is the text explained away, so rather than a translation, it offers itself as an opening for *Água viva* to continue. "Now is the domain of now. And as long as the improvisation lasts, I'm being born." Hence the power of reading through another creative act, and of going so far as to let the text pass onto another medium.

Aesthetic experience in Clarice Lispector's and Roni Horn's *œuvres* effects the work of art's "realization" – yet without completion, without closure. In its quality of pure event, of sheer movement, aesthetic experience underscores a notion of the work as interactive process, in opposition to the finished, perfected and therefore quiet object whose rise to the status of art has been successfully accomplished: "...quero não o que está feito mas o que tortuosamente ainda se faz" 'I want not what is made but what is sinuously still in the making', declares Lispector's

Água viva.⁵ In every sense, *Água viva* is ultimately unclassifiable, but here is a rough sketch: carried forth by a voice in the first person inflected in the feminine,⁶ and intermittently addressing a “you,” seventy-eight pages of prose flow, unlike a novel, in passages free of narrative connection to each other. Perhaps it was on trying to suggest a notion of “stream of consciousness” that the English translation was titled *The Stream of Life*. However, its composition entailed a careful stitching together of small fragments produced at various moments of improvisation. They combine, for instance, very abstract sentences (“Por enquanto o tempo é quanto dura um pensamento” (21). ‘For now time is as long as a thought lasts.’) with depictions of different flower species (in what the voice calls a “*De natura florum*”), particular moments in a day (“Agora é de novo madrugada” (39) ‘Now it is again the early morning’), and perplexing images of birth (“Estou de olhos fechados. Sou pura inconsciência. Já cortaram o cordão umbilical: estou solta no universo” (34). ‘My eyes are closed. I am pure unconsciousness. The umbilical cord is already cut: I am unbound in the universe.’) As scattered as the textual flow may seem, the voice consistently brings the reader with it to attend whatever is in the process of happening.

This voice admits awareness to its own writing movement and stages an act of writing about something it cannot/refuses to explain or seize for itself; for this writer the theme has the status of an enigma. As early as the third paragraph the voice asks: “Meu tema é o instante? meu tema de vida” (10). ‘Is my theme the instant? my life theme.’ *Água viva* unravels in phrases that

⁵ My translation for all the quotations of this text.

⁶ Because the text deliberately dissolves characterization and seeks to unfold before any determination, I have chosen not to explore at length the question of femininity through the text’s first-person feminine voice in this chapter. However, this is not to disregard the gender inflection, which is inescapable in the Portuguese language. The femininity of the voice speaking *Água viva* (also not to be mistaken for the voice of the person Clarice Lispector) is key to produce the unique subject of the work of art. To trace the logic of a procedure that moves from “woman” to a cryptic “G.H.” who only allows the definition “living being,” see Lispector’s earlier text written in the first person feminine, *A Paixão segundo G.H.* It is this very gesture that Deleuze and Guattari will suggest a few years later, with the line of flight from human to molecular, starting with a *becoming-woman*. See “Devenir-intense, devenir- animal, devenir-imperceptible” in *Mille Plateaux*.

insistently reformulate an ineffable desire.⁷ In doing so, they brush lightly, as only the work of art can, against the ungraspable stuff of the aesthetic experience that is the work's indefinite realization: "pure present," as the epigraph from my own text announces. Because each utterance happens "now," the tense in which the work unfolds and the aesthetic experience produces itself could seem as, simply, the present continuous. However, to close in on the peculiarity of its temporal milieu, *Água viva* figures the minimal cuts that articulate such a present:

Mas o instante-jà é um pirilampo que acende e apaga, acende e apaga. O presente é o instante em que a roda do automóvel em alta velocidade toca minimamente no chão. (15)

But the now-instant is a firefly that goes on and off, on and off. The present is the instant in which the wheel of the car at high speed barely touches the ground.

Here each instant is at its source – between on and off and the spinning wheel barely touching the ground. It is also, as staged in *Rings of Lisspector*, the instant of one's feet barely touching the rubber floor and one's eye subtly meeting the word at the surface. Before the present incorporates itself, if only slightly, into the already-past, before it is assimilated by the temporal continuum, the "now-instant" quickly yields a twinkling, fluttering moment. The present is thus what escapes the once-and-for-all of facts ("feitos" or "fatos") where each instant must eventually settle down and perish.⁸ Driven essentially by unattainable "pure present," this literary piece makes an intervention in Western Metaphysics.

⁷"Quero" starts many of the text's phrases, frequently followed by an object that overflows any ordinary possibility of possessing it. For instance, "Quero um manto tecido com fios de ouro solar" (39). 'I want a cloak woven with threads of solar gold.'

⁸ Casting light on the problem regarding consciousness and the aporia the pure present entails for thought, Bergson's reflection on the pure present (see this chapter's epigraph) continues: "Vous définissez arbitrairement le présent *ce qui est*, alors que le présent est simplement *ce qui se fait*. Rien n'est moins que le moment présent, si vous entendez par là cette limite indivisible qui sépare le passé et l'avenir. Lorsque nous pensons ce présent comme devant être, il n'est pas encore; et quand nous le pensons comme existant, il est déjà passé. (...) si, au contraire vous considérez le présent concret et réellement vécu par la conscience, on peut dire que ce présent consiste en grande partie dans le passé immédiat" (291). Shaviri addresses this problem of the instable, limit-case of the present through Whitehead's genetic account of entities as primordially affective, which allows us to think below or before the Kantian space-time ground of sensibility, and what is, in the words of Bergson (whom Whitehead considers), "really experienced by consciousness." "Every 'pulse of emotion'... is both a fresh creation of space-time and an

Alive or *Living* – as the title of *Água viva* indicates, the work of art cannot stay still, and if “still life” could describe Lispector and Horn’s pieces, “still” would elicit only the dimension of what persists, unstably and restlessly living. More than a theme, water is the main element of the artwork, as their fluid treatment of the artwork’s arena makes palpable. *Still Water (The River Thames, For Example)* names one of Horn’s photographic series’ on the British river.



Figure 6. Roni Horn, *Still Water (The River Thames, For Example)* (detail) (1999). Offset lithograph, 30 1/2 x 41 1/2" (77.5 x 105.4 cm). Acquired through the generosity of Kathy and Richard S. Fuld, Jr. © 2011 Roni Horn. MOMA, New York: <http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=106692>

Images of the running Thames become fixed by the photographic process, but Horn reverses and makes it flow anew through various strategies; first of all by setting the photographs in different sequences to produce several different pieces, either in installations like the one just mentioned, or in different books. Water stopped by the camera’s shot turns back into water still un-stilled. Another articulation of the photos bears the title *Some Thames*, contesting the arrest implied in “all the Thames” as does “sometimes” against “all the time,”⁹ and so resisting the stagnation of

immediate perishing, or “objectification. ... It is only when an actual entity perishes – when it is no longer actively engaged in the process of feeling – that it is fully “spatialized,” to use Bergson’s term” (61).

⁹ Cixous brings attention to this pun in her annotation of Roni Horn’s *Wonderwater (Alice Off-shore)*: “*Some Thames someone feels like a motherless child. I feel like a fatherless child, now and thames. But I’ve never been motherless, nor riverless, nor waterless*” (111). This project is made up of four book volumes. Each one has the same sequence of titles of artworks by Roni Horn, yet is freely annotated by a different author (prompting the reader

permanence and totality. Heraclitean, the photographs are but the flash of an instant of the Thames—the London portion of which was chosen by Horn for this project for the city’s “indecisive weather,” for the river’s “moodiness,” and for being a tidal river, which means it “has these vertical changes and it moves very quickly” (Horn, “Water”).

Yet on the photographs the water seems to have coagulated, hardened, or frozen. In this sense they illustrate the anxious attempt to retain the escaping instant. As a result, the photographs present the river in pieces, as a multiplicity of colors and textures that could not be assembled into a single uniform body. “The color of the water (whatever it is) changes constantly. Half of it is the sky” (Horn, *Another Water* n.11). But if the dissected river is arrested in the photos, now it is the viewer who encountering those bits of river-life in sequences reanimates and sustains the course of the fleeting moment. However strongly codified by ideals of stability and wholeness, life remains an unfinished and fragmentary experience. Lispector’s and Horn’s artistic strategies advance with this axiom. Far from raising art as an immaculate and timeless space secluded from ordinary life, it is a matter of producing what Jacques Rancière called “événements micro-sensibles”¹⁰ a shift whereby life becomes disorganized and reveals its strange center.

...quando estranho a pintura é aí que é pintura. E quando estranho a palavra é aí que ela alcança o sentido. E quando estranho a vida aí é que começa a vida. (76)

to interrogate authorship): Louise Bourgeois, Anne Carson, Hélène Cixous, and John Waters. The variations stage, again, the endless, unfinished, and, if you will, inter-subjective character of the work of art.

¹⁰ Rancière locates in Stendhal’s *Vie de Henry Brulard* the origin of a writing “made of sensible micro-events” that blurs the distinction between art objects and those of ordinary life, testifying to what aesthetic theory, starting with Kant, Hegel, and Schiller, seeks to interpret. See *Malaise dans l’esthétique* (13). Lispector stages the problem of public and private through the chronicle genre, where she assigns a central role to these tiny irrelevant moments, as Castillo points out: “...essa crônica sobre nada remete ao ponto original da autora sobre a verdade além das palavras: os fundamentos do ser não se encontram em grandes acontecimentos, mas no tédio, nos pequenos detalhes que colocam seu corpo em justaposição ao corpo do leitor no fugaz instante do agora, por meio de ações como acender um cigarro” (101). “...this chronicle on nothing refers to the author’s original point on the truth beyond words: the fundamentals of being do not lie in great events, but rather in tedium, in the small details that place her body in juxtaposition to the reader’s body in the fleeting instant of the now, through actions such as lighting a cigarette.” My translation.

...when I find painting strange, it is there that it is painting. And when I find the word strange, it is there that it reaches sense. And when I find life strange, it is there that life begins.

Experientially this state of estrangement entails stepping out of the usual coordinates, where life seems tamed and understood, to face its own, unknown, substratal flow. So, in the *Thames* photographs water often does not look like water at all. Hence this warning to their viewer: “Looking at an image like this you may never get to the idea of water at all” (Horn, *Another Water* n.8). Dissimilar moments of a play of light and undulation are all we see. Since each myopic image overflows the frame, the viewer cannot be sure about the identity of the camera’s object. In this shot, for instance, the viscosity and thickness of the ripples could lead anyone not looking at this image within the project’s context to guess they see lead or mercury, if not for the reflections some of the photograph’s area captures:



Figure7. Roni Horn, *Still Water* (detail). Offset lithograph, 30 1/2 x 41 1/2" (77.5 x 105.4 cm). © 2011 Roni Horn. MOMA, New York: <http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=106692>

Exposing media to their outside also contribute to the effect of estrangement, and this is a strategy Horn incessantly experiments with; the combination of word, image, and spatiality is

central to her technique. In addition to the paradox of visual stillness and stiffness of a solvent and fluid medium, along the bottom edge of the *Thames* images flows a sequence of footnotes that comment on the photograph and interrogate the viewer's experience of viewing and understanding of water. Here are a few:

²² You say it's a river. I can believe that. But when you say it's water, I get suspicious. (...) ²³ Is the Thames a case of mistaken identity? ²⁴ When you say water, what do you mean? (...) ³⁶ What does water look like?

"For now we see..." *Water, the Apeiron*

1. A site of fiction

Western philosophy initially posited aesthetic experience in terms of a given subject of consciousness.¹¹ Conversely, the works discussed here seek an event whose place, to use a recurrent formula in Lispector's text, is "behind thought." Before it became *Água viva*, one of the titles the author worked with was actually *Atrás do pensamento: A vida vista pela vida* 'Behind Thought: Life Seen by Life.' As "life in life's eye," aesthetic experience finds an address where no thinking 'I' could possibly reside beforehand; no point of view, except life's own, precedes the event. Of course a viewer and a reader of the work are indispensable, but because the subject of consciousness as model for the aesthetic is being debunked here, the reader and viewer positions must take on novel implications. The inaugural event – where life, living, time, appear as never before – pushes this viewer/reader to the limits of the thinkable, for how can "life seen by life" be conceived? And what is reading and viewing like "behind thought"? Only fiction can radically call forth such a site. To become the reader/viewer, then, one must allow the work to

¹¹ A.G. Baumgarten, who invented the term "aesthetics" in the 18th century; within a Leibnizian rationalist paradigm, he upheld a discipline external to logic by modeling the "science of sensible cognition" upon the "clear and distinct" criteria for thinking in Descartes' *Meditations*. Therefore, the obscure and confuse traits of sensible representations that may unfold (poetically or artistically) into a non-analytical clarity or "brightness" resonate in "For now we see through a glass, brightly," letting us turn the locution into an assertion of the aesthetic, unsubordinated to another light.

pull one into its fiction, and let it guide the way at this unusual clearing where a subject not of thought but of the aesthetic event, in this case of “now,” can be born: “...a vida então se torna fragilmente verdadeira. E está-se no instante-já: come-se a fruta na sua vigência” (64). ‘...life then turns fragilely true. And one is in the now-instant: the fruit is eaten at its peak.’ The aesthetic event’s nature is that of a unique perishing fruit; what the text requires is a reader/viewer would come into existence to enjoy it while it is alive.

2. “Now” vs. “Presence”

“O agora,” “o instante-agora,” “o instante-já” ‘the now,’ ‘the now-instant,’ and ‘the now-already’ are some of the names for the experience “behind thought” that *Água viva* insistently summons and strives to write as it speaks to and creates its reader:¹²

Como te explicar? Vou tentar. É que estou percebendo uma realidade enviesada. Vista por um corte oblíquo. Só *agora* pressenti o oblíquo da vida. Antes só via através de cortes retos e paralelos. Não percebia o sonso traço enviesado. *Agora* adivinho que a vida é outra. Que viver não é só desenrolar sentimentos grossos —é algo mais sortilégico e mais grácil, sem por isso perder o seu fino vigor animal. (62-3; my emphasis)

How do I explain it to you? I will try. It’s that I’m perceiving a slanted reality. Seen through an oblique cut. Only now I sensed the oblique in life. Before I only saw through the rectilinear and parallel cuts. I did not perceive the discrete slanted trace. Now I divine that life is other. That life is not only unraveling coarse feelings — it is something more divinatory and more graceful, without losing its fine animal vigor for it.

Before returning to the problem of creating a reader, let us consider the role of “now”—unfinished, continuously flowing, pre-factual—against the ideal of absolute Presence in Western metaphysics (whose corollary is the subject of consciousness).¹³ Certainly the threads of vision,

¹² Lucia Helena considers this to be the temporality of Lispectorian narratives, and particularly of *Água viva*, in *Nem musa nem medusa* and in “Cuidado, escrita, e volúpia em Clarice Lispector.”

¹³ See Derrida’s “Ousia et grammè.” If the “now” as aesthetic experience or event of the work of art remains a properly metaphysical determination, it is only in the effort of critiquing that tradition. “In order to exceed metaphysics, it is necessary that a trace be inscribed within the text of metaphysics, a trace that continues to signal not in the direction of another presence, or another form of presence, but in the direction of an entirely other text. Such a trace cannot be thought *more metaphysico*. No philosopheme is prepared to master it...” (*Margins of Philosophy* 65). An “entirely other text” would have to operate differently regarding knowledge and truth; this is why fiction, literature, poetry, are the insistent “other text” Derrida’s thought turns to.

speech, and knowledge ostensibly shape both metaphysical discourse and the Horn-Lispector account of the work of art (more on this at the end of this chapter). Yet as close as their resemblance may come, the *now*'s subversive effect unfailingly emerges. Producing and at the same time reaching the evanescent *now* is a tour de force, particularly since the traits that distinguish its realm from the one it leaves behind are *unlike* those engrained in the tradition of Presence, where two realms may also be located.¹⁴ In the previous quotation *Água viva* suggests just this, particularly against the backdrop of Paul's 1 Corinthians 13:12: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face."¹⁵ Transition between realms in the Biblical text makes "now" stand for the lower realm of an imperfect present. The superlative "face to face," reiterated in the subsequent sentence "now I know only in part; then I will know fully, as I have been fully known" makes "then" signal the absolute Presence of God.

Água viva instead transforms the very moment of "speaking" an entry into a new realm of reality. It shifts the act of seeing from "rectilinear parallel cuts" to "slanted" and "oblique;" from life in coarse feelings, that is, in an assimilated experience, to life as "other," where this alterity resists unraveling by way of knowledge so much that it calls for "divinatory" skill. Finally, Paul expects experience to shift from the fleeting, partial now, to absolute Presence. For Paul the text would be "a mirror" allowing a merely dim, or oblique view of God. In defiance of it, aesthetic experience is a passage into sensing and seeing, obliquely, each radically unpredictable *now* that only blooms in fragment. If, in *the now*, where life turns "fragilely true," the act of living,

¹⁴ For example, Parmenidian non-Being and Being, Platonic Becoming and Being, Christian earthly vs. celestial life, The One and the Multiple for Plotinus... all of which overlap and intertwine at different points of the tradition.

¹⁵ The title of my chapter alludes to this very citation. The translation of 1 Corinthians 13:12 into English has obviously undergone many variations; the original Greek reads βλέπομεν γὰρ ἀρτι δι' ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι'. While the KJV translation of "esoptron" as "glass" is ambiguous and connotes other figures than "mirror," it reflects the elements and materials Horn's and Lispector's pieces raise here. The columns filled with water from Icelandic glaciers in Horn's *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* are made of glass. Each one of these objects at once mirrors and distorts the objects around it, effecting a curvature of the space they inhabit, as well as a multiplication of images.

graceful and divinatory (and not deductive), keeps its “fine animal vigor,” then perhaps the subject of this experience, while marked by “life,” rises differing from Christianity’s “human soul” (but more on this further on).

3. The paradox of “water-writing”

Writing for *Água viva* is not subordinated to a more authentic Presence or reality; what gives birth to *the now* is, rather, that “oblique” domain of writing:

Estas minhas frases balbuciadas são feitas na hora mesma em que estão sendo escritas e crepitam de tão novas e ainda verdes. Elas são o já. Quero a experiência de uma falta de construção. (25)

These babbled phrases of mine are made at the very hour in which they are being written and they tremble from being so new and still green. They are the now. I want the experience of a lack of construction.

To “attain” the indefinite, this “lack of construction,” the means is writing: a stutter of unprecedented phrases, portrayed as a verdant form of *now* for their delicate, perishable character and unending process of becoming. Only an extremely elusive kind of materiality can support a writing that un-defines; such is water—devoid of shape, color, odor, taste or consistency of its own. So Horn’s footnotes ask:

⁵⁸ What do you know about water? That it’s everywhere, so familiar-seeming and yet so elusive (a kind of everything without definition), never quite graspable, even as an ice cube?

What happens when a text’s name is water? While Lispector’s and Horn’s pieces have titles, the act of naming they derive from runs counter to a determination and identification of objects whereby their naming agent establishes its mastery over them. Paradox allows for a title defiant of definition, necessary to incite the aesthetic experience in its release of *now* and of a new, coetaneous subject – “atrás do pensamento” and “before cosmos is formed.”

In the impasse of naming these works entertain thought breaks free from the very apparatus on which Western philosophy mounted the possibility of knowledge, occupied with a delimiting and stabilizing function of names, and centered upon human subjectivity (much in the way man is given dominion over creation in Genesis). Precisely the nature of these coordinates renders thinking past them, “before” or “behind,” so threatening. In such context the relevance of venturing out to the limen of thought contest the epistemology (grounding the beginning of aesthetics for philosophy) where, from the most passive moment of perception, discerning functions reduce the muddle of sensory stimuli for the sake of recognizing objects. Thought, in turn, must set limits if any concept is to be defined and distinguished from another. When cognitive acts are carried out, a principle of identity wards off contradictory instances to impede confusion from seeping in. Epistemology appears as work against chaos.

Within the same philosophical heritage, a counter-procedure for knowledge as opening towards the unknown is to be found in the Milesian Presocratics, quite in line with Lispector’s and Horn’s naming strategies that begin to demonstrate a particular treatment of word and image. They share with Thales, who named water as the first principle of reality, something more profound than the common privileging of the liquid element, although this choice does convey the operation at stake. Instead of providing answers, the names these cosmogonies raise as the origin of all reality¹⁶ force thought and perception to confront a structural limit, that is to say, the very function of the limit that operates in them. Where Thales claimed this origin was *water*, Anaximander considered it necessary to posit something even before any of the definable elements that form cosmos, so it had to be *apeiron*, that is, the indefinite, limitless, or boundless

¹⁶ “Of those who first pursued philosophy, the majority believed that the only principles of all things are principles in the form of matter. For that of which all existing things are composed and that out of which they originally come into being and that into which they finally perish, the substance persisting but changing in its attributes, this they state is the element and principle of things that are.... For there must be one or more than one nature out of which the rest come to be, while it is preserved.” Aristotle. *Metaphysics* 1.3 983b6-18.

“out of which come to be all the heavens and the worlds in them.”¹⁷ In this light, the Milesian physicists reverse the motion sparked by naming, insofar as the question of the origin prompts them to surpass the limit that cosmos relies on. Moreover, their material first principles imagine the absence of form. In this sense, water, the *apeiron*, and even the *aer* Anaximenes posits, all suggest amorphous “matter” and the sensible as insubordinate to the role these take since Platonist theories of Forms and Aristotle’s hylomorphism – in other words, as yet ungrasped by form or the intellect. *Water-apeiron*, then, is the position of aesthetic experience and its subject.

Water, then, is a cosmic element that can take viewers/readers to the point of non-recognition, as both Horn’s and Lispector’s pieces show. This negative experience plays an important role in the aesthetic event they trigger.¹⁸ If “cosmos” designates order and a harmonious arrangement of the vital elements whereby form is achieved, Horn’s water research deranges the viewer’s very sense of order and summons formless visions, as if delivered to a pre-cosmic, ante-predicative moment. What we see has no name yet. A text called *Água viva* must, in turn, speak (of) the ungraspable; it upholds “the now” as “pre-cosmic” elementary life, before creation is accomplished. But how to make the nameless appear in writing once the title delivers it to the pre-cosmic limens of thought? How to continue, and cast this life-water in itself, in its absence of features? Furthermore, how to read it? Perhaps only by going as far as to reinvent

¹⁷ Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics* 24.13-21= 12B1 + A9.

¹⁸ Kant considered negativity and non-recognition in his account of the feelings of the beautiful and the sublime, in the *Critique of Judgment*. His work on aesthetic feeling discusses the event they impose upon the subject of reason, endowed with a set of faculties whose operations vary according, firstly, to the kind of judgment the subject is making. Thus, these aesthetic feelings correspond to the reflexive judgment, in accordance to the disinterest in the existence or definition of the object whereby the feeling is aroused. To judge aesthetically means, then, judging without a concept (See §28). To summarize the play of the faculties in each of the two feelings, one can say that the beautiful entails a harmonious play of the faculties of understanding and imagination without a concept to define the object awakening this play, unlike the determining judgment of understanding; the sublime, in turn, engages reason and the imagination. The subject finds itself incapable of presenting ideas to itself, but in this failure of the imagination, the subject of reason’s power to think what exceeds presentation, and to elevate itself above nature, come to the fore.

these activities altogether. This is exactly what Lispector and Horn's works propose, which entails rethinking the notion of work of art as well.

A Field for the Work of Art: Hearing the Rings of Água Viva

1. The artwork as an act of reading

The relevance of *Rings* performing and proposing a unique reading lies in that *Água Viva* complicates the very function of words, both thematically and structurally. How does one read where a displacement of the function of words has occurred and yet a reader continues to be expected? Horn's piece focuses on this aspect of Lispector's fiction and extends its exploration into the plastic dimension. The text's voice writes, but renounces mastery over the process: "Não sei sobre o que estou escrevendo: sou obscura para mim mesma (22)." 'I don't know what I'm writing about: I am obscure to myself'; and here it presents its relationship to words:

A densa selva de palavras envolve espessamente o que sinto e vivo, e transforma tudo o que sou em alguma coisa minha que fica fora de mim. (23)

The dense jungle of words wraps itself thickly around what I feel and live and transforms everything I am into something of my own that remains beyond me.

The voice excludes itself from meaning and places "the dense jungle of words" as foreign to experience ("what I feel and live"); words estrange the voice from itself, since meaning is beyond it. Even the text's lack of story is recognized:¹⁹ "Isto não é história porque não conheço

¹⁹ These negative features are of course not only particular to Lispector's novels, but a major issue in 20th century literature, whose start is often located with Mallarmé at the turn of the century. The intention through this emptying out of content and meaning, the dissolution of form, and the break with hermeneutics remains however heterogeneous between works. Concerning the status of the speaking voice, its motor, and its relationship to the meaning of its utterances, one could elsewhere develop a comparison between *Água viva* and another 20th century work of narrative such as Beckett's. Take, for instance, the play *Not I*, where the voice is also cast forth as an entity, disjointed, as it were, from the other components of an apparatus of self-consciousness. Unlike the voice in *Água viva*, Mouth, the protagonist of this play, is deaf and speaks only in the third person of a "she." The verbal flow here is nervous, anxious and racing. When it is performed (when the voice projects itself onto sonorous space), a dramatic rise and descent of volume adds to the sense of this speech being out of control. *Água viva*'s overflow seems instead unrushed, joyously pouring upon arrival at some opening where it is set free. The feminine voice here desires to be enjoyed as music. Also, relevantly to the analysis of the struggle of voice as a living force, with its limit, its end, its death, the speaking subjects in Beckett's oeuvre, e.g. *Molloy* or *Stirrings Still* are tired, agonizing

história assim, mas só sei ir dizendo e fazendo: é história de instantes que fogem como os trilhos fugitivos que se vêem da janela do trem (67).” “This isn’t a story because I don’t know stories as such, but only know how to keep on speaking doing: it’s a story of instants that flash by, like fugitive tracks seen from a train window (59).” From one phrase and image to the next, the voice flows on without trying to explicate or elaborate on the previous statement, unconcerned about leaving behind what has been said, since its priority is to keep up with the present moment and continue in the novelty of saying. Thus, the voice that carries living water – água viva – does not transcend the writing, nor should it be mistaken for a permanent vessel, impervious to the liquid coursing through.

Unreservedly the voice expels itself in the direction of a “you,” whereby the reader is interpellated, but the latter’s relationship to the text is also questioned, since the traditional prompts to unravel a text are missing. “Ouve-me” ‘hear me’ is the voice’s command,²⁰ so how does reading function, what ought the reader of fiction to do with the text, and how does this living water’s erosion fashion the reading subject? Does the voice pleading “ouve” ‘listen’ demand that the reader supply the permanent vessel, or must the reader enter into the “living,” ephemeral status of the voice? Can the reader still decipher meaning here, and if not, how will it read, if reading is still possible at all?

As a visual and spatial artifact that makes statements through the particularities of its appearance, Horn’s *Rings of Lispector* thus advocates for the readability of *Água viva*. The art piece goes as far as to demonstrate it, all without neglecting the problem of reading at stake in

and longing for the end, there where the voice streaming through *Água viva* wants to continue on, beyond the boundaries of the book.

²⁰On the work of writing as anti-synthetic and its corresponding feeling of the sublime, see Jean-François Lyotard’s “Retour” in *Lectures d’enfance*. In this analysis of Joyce’s *Ulysses* Lyotard casts writing as testimony to a strange voice, beyond both human and nature, which commands one to listen. The relationship between reader and writer as engendering one another is also posed here, in terms of the Father/son link Odysseus and Telemachus characterize in Homer’s *Odyssey*.

the text; on the contrary, a genuine reading of *Água viva*, *Rings* is compelled to deal with this problem. To read, the artwork must acknowledge the text's crucial questioning of what reading is, to the point of becoming its own condition of production. In other words, *Rings* is an artwork insofar as it executes a reading of *Água viva*, which means that it allows the problem of reading to become one of its constitutive elements. We can say that the act of reading as work of art already construes the meaning of "reading" as, above all, "creation," in its unprecedented, improvising character. In order to see the relation between artwork and text, however, the notions of reading and creation must still be thought through. A work of art is actually far from a simplistic solution to the challenge of reading this lyrical meditation.

2. Reading as work of art

First of all, the traits of *Água viva*'s writing set forth unique procedures for reading; consequently, it is through these that *Rings* can posit itself as artwork. Why, then, does *Rings* deal with the English translation instead of presenting the original text in Portuguese? Because detachment from linguistic rigor is there to dismantle the literary critic's interpretative, meaning-seeking habits that impede the encounter *Água viva* seeks. All aspects of the voice make the writing piece feel closer to music than to verbal composition. The voice itself declares: "Não se compreende música: ouve-se. Ouve-me então com teu corpo inteiro" (10) 'Music is not understood: it is heard. Hear me then with your entire body.' So rather than a hermeneutic practice of interpretation, it calls for one in the musical sense of this term. Through this indication the reader is called to accompany the voice's own desire:

E eis que percebo que quero para mim o substrato vibrante da palavra repetida em canto gregoriano. Estou consciente de que tudo o que sei não posso dizer, só sei pintando ou pronunciando sílabas cegas de sentido. E se tenho aqui que usar-te palavras, elas têm que fazer um sentido quase que só corpóreo, estou em luta com a vibração última. ... Lê então o meu invento de pura vibração sem significado senão o de cada esfuziante sílaba... (11)

And it's that I realize that I want for myself the vibrant substrate of the word repeated in Gregorian chant. I am aware that everything I know I cannot say, I only know painting or pronouncing syllables blind to meaning. And if I must use for you words, they must make an almost only corporeal one, I am wrestling with the ultimate vibration... Read then my invention of pure vibration without meaning aside from that of each whistling syllable...

It is the substratum of words and its last or ultimate vibration the voice wants and wrestles with, making crucial a particular, almost impossible mode of participation from the reader. But in the need of attaining “vibrancy without signification” – like interpreters producing music as they follow a score with their instrument – these declarations hint at the pertinence of crossing the verbal borderline. One could object that even at the purely aural level there is real specificity to each language – to its whistling syllables – that does not disappear by eliminating the quest for meaning. However, in *Rings* Horn draws a connection between *Água viva* and a medium other than the literary, other, even, than the aural, namely, engaging the reader's “whole body” and bringing the “blind syllables” to the visual and to a surface in space where they can reverberate. Its notion of reading is not so much concerned with extracting the hidden meaning of the written, or of locating the text (linguistically, culturally, nationally), as it is with performing or playing the text in another space, while keeping some sort of fidelity to the precise indications of the piece's score.²¹

Most of all, musical interpretation of *Água viva* asks the reader to keep up with the movement. The listening reader synchronizes with the textual flow by letting the voice resonate in its ear. *Rings*, then, is like an instrument or an ear in which *Água viva* takes place, maintaining its vibration:

²¹ This process of transposition recalls Mallarmé, for whom the musical model was so important. In search for a new writing event, his texts called precisely for what the voice in *Água viva* claims to experience, namely, words sounding freely, producing an effect outside meaning. See “Crise de vers.”

Vejo que nunca te disse como escuto música –apoio de leve a mão na eletrola e a mão vibra espalhando ondas pelo corpo todo: assim ouço a eletricidade da vibração, substrato último no domínio da realidade, e o mundo treme nas minhas mãos. (11)

I see that I never told you how I listen to music –I softly press my hand on the record player and the hand vibrates spreading waves through the whole body: this way I hear the electricity of vibration, ultimate substrate of the domain of reality, and the world trembles in my hands.

If reading is estranged, as writing and life are in *Água viva*, then listening to music could only be practiced in unusual ways too. All this distortion is endured for the sake of attaining the aesthetic event. Vibration in this quote and the previous one relocates the text's core; more essential than the meaning of words is the subtly sounding "electricity of vibration," audible through bodily engagement, as it becomes a living space for this "ultimate substrate of the domain of reality" to traverse. Repeating the listening gesture the voice already performs, readers in *Rings of Lispector* pace around the room of the installation following the text fragments on the floor; their bodily rhythm is forced to join the flows scattered here and there in a dance, winding and curling in and out of phrases.

The installation experience thus accentuates the synchronicity between the voice and the reader already at work in the book, which tells us: "Estou respirando. Para cima e para baixo. Para cima e para baixo" (28) 'I am breathing. Rise and fall. Rise and fall.' Mostly forgotten in the act of focusing awareness on a text (as in practically every other living moment, whether there is focus or distraction), the body's blood and breath flows truly merge with the time in which *Água viva*'s voice moves along, sometimes through astounding phrases like this one: "Posso não ter sentido mas é a mesma falta de sentido que tem a veia que pulsa" (13) 'I may be meaningless, but it is the same lack of meaning the pulsing vein has.' Walking the text in a cleared room as one does on *Rings*, what surfaces for the readers is their own incessant process of becoming, going on independent of awareness, and, as the quotation points out, of meaning or

purpose. The text resonates in the readers, making them notice the reverberating effect of their presence in the room.

Horn's unique articulation of space, rubber, text, and visitors, as components of the work, expresses a stance with regard to the "purpose" of the artwork, as well as to the process of art-making. In producing a space of this kind as art, Horn's work slips, from the status of precious object as endpoint of the artist's work, to become the site of a possible event whose agent is somehow the visitor. Installation as a medium evidently opposes a concept of the work as product of the artist's genius alone; the artifact the artist designs and exhibits must not finalize the work. The work of art as a composite of moments—from gathering material to organizing it for the visitor, to the encounter through this visit and its effect—is more accurately described as an event than as an object.²² The end of this chapter will return to the role of inter-subjectivity in the production of the event through *Água viva*'s address of a "you" and through another set of projects by Horn. But before stepping out of *Rings* we will look at how it poses the question of discontinuous speech.

3. Cut and Flow

Earlier I said that in *Rings* phrases are not cut according to Lispector's punctuation. In a sense, this choice of untying the syntactic laces of the text corresponds to the liberating gesture that lets *Água viva* spill out of the confines of the book onto the floor, where it freely expands in vibrant ripples. And yet, there is still cutting. A difficult balance *Água viva* moves in appears when one takes into account that the material this living water embodies itself in is words and the

²² Notwithstanding the importance of relation and the inclusion of the visitor/viewer/reader in the work, Horn's and Lispector's conception of the work of art strongly differs from Nicholas Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics." The latter has recently developed in a context of the installation art form's spread, and of pieces that require the spectator's participation. While this theory sees the artwork as encounter between the artist and the viewer via the artifact, the relationship reinforces a humanist subjectivity with its tenets of identity and recognition. As a result, the sense of presence suggested through the artwork adheres to the metaphysical structure Horn and Lispector critique. The human obstructs the instant in itself, of the *now*, insofar as the survival-gearred subject's perspective regarding time is a controlling one, whereby the singular puissance of the *now* is suppressed.

space between them. Liquid water is uncut, fluid, seamless; meanwhile, phrases only flow forward on the basis of articulation, that is, only by stitching fragments together. The writing in Lispector's text does not proceed by denying this nature of phrases, nor does she eliminate punctuation to imitate fluidity.

Consequently, cutting remains present as the process of the words unraveling on the rubber floor of *Rings*, through the fragmentary status of phrases drawing curvilinear shapes that visibly begin and end. Moreover, the latter comes together by the conspicuous assembly of huge rubber tiles (69in sq x 1 ¼ in thick). Yet another index of cutting is found in inscription/drawing, since the letter-rings are inlaid in the rubber surface. As plastic metaphor, rubber does not arrest the speaking voice; conversely, the material maintains the voice's live force, insofar as it is given the power to imbue the normally water-resistant surface. Through the paradox of discontinuity implied in the cut, *Rings* preserves the flow and gushing forth of "água viva."

Such a paradoxical strategy comes from the text's own procedures. Only at a first glance does *Rings* distance itself from the text's principle, then. The strategy I have just explained, which includes cutting the phrases at different points, reveals and performs a writing operation of the text: the liquid continuity that comes only in the fragment. Cixous notes the text's production of sequences with short, halting sentences:

The whole text works on interruption and continuity, a continuity that demands interruption, interruption into which continuity flows. It can be said that this story of continuity in breaking represents the indissociable ensemble of this text. Content and form cannot be dissociated. Content becomes form; the container flows into the contained and the text weaves itself incessantly. (*Reading* 35)

Its dialectic of continuity and interruption corresponds, in her view, to the indissociable relation – between form and content – that shapes the plot, or flow, of the text itself, where interruption becomes an opening for the text to continue. According to this view, the model for such dialectic

would probably be (underscoring the “living” attribute of the text) organic tissue; the consequence of the cut here is a flow of blood and an event of the skin binding itself again to heal, as opposed to, say, a crust, which once broken remains static.²³ Telling but its own story, the present continuous thus issues from live cuts. If, as Cixous observes, there is fusion of content and form, then the reader ought to overcome a dualism of words and spacing. Reading must engage with the space between words not as the latter’s container, not in subordination to the meaning sentences convey, but as inextricable from the voice. Just this is what *Rings* upholds, by conjoining the 25 streams of *Água viva* that Horn refers to as “drawings” with plain tiles, allowing the piece to fit the display room from wall to wall. *Rings* is a drawing/text, made up of phrases, drawings, tiles, and even the building it inundates. The ultimate vibration of the text is in its silences.

Speech in the text includes binding interruptions, and there is silence. Perhaps it lies between interruption and speech. As the text comes to the last phrase the voice speaks most insistently on how what it writes, as always intimately to this “you,” continues on, and here it provides the important reading clue Cixous highlights in the indissociabile status of form and content: “...o que te escrevo continua. ...O melhor ainda não foi escrito. O melhor está nas entrelinhas” (86) ‘...what I write to you continues. ...The best is not yet written. The best is in between the lines.’ In between the lines, and the periods, and the words. Only by taking all this into account, as *Rings* does, can the indispensable reader actualize this strange present-continuous not hinged upon the voice always speaking out something. This is probably why the twenty-five phrases selected in Horn’s piece share the themes of silence, of the ineffable beyond-words, which the drawings contouring silence portray, and of this ineffable’s involvement with

²³ This calls to mind the entire spectrum of signifiers in Derrida’s “Le *sans* de la coupure pure,” playing on the homophony of “sans” ‘without,’ “sens” ‘sense/meaning/direction,’ and “sang” ‘blood.’

the fleeting instant, with *now*. Without silence no *now* may gush forward, and no adventure of boundlessness is possible.

Earlier I pointed out the special function of naming in works with titles such as *Água viva*, explained through the Presocratics' names for the first principles. Instead of fixing an identity within limits, by inciting thought through the elusive figure of living water, or water-*apeiron*, this title provokes it to override cognitive operations. Leaving a piece without a title is a common practice in the plastic arts; to do so is to let the piece become an *Untitled*, generally followed by the date of its elaboration. Although this inclination is rare in literature, the text called *Água viva* is attuned to such gestures. First, because the figure of *Água viva* has an undetermining effect, and second, due to its past marked by hesitance and change of title. The earlier names of the piece were as diaphanous as *Água viva*.

As previously mentioned, for a while this writing piece was called *Atrás do pensamento: A vida vista pela vida*, directly orienting thought beyond or before identity, definition, and determination. As also noted, this title displaces the locus of perception from the human subject to life itself. Linguistic mastery slips away too in this gesture of shifting perception, because if the perceiver ceases to be the human subject, who is there to cognize and account for the perceived? This kind of impasse also arises, I showed, in the visual/spatial work of *Water Still (Some Thames)*.

Lispector's earliest title for the piece was *Objeto gritante*, which expresses a dramatic inversion concerning the common epistemological relationship between rational subjects of language and the objects of the world available to them, whose part is inert and quiet. The screaming object is instead alive, disquiet, making itself heard, and violently resisting the

domestication a name could bring. Screaming, rather than speaking situates it beyond and beneath the constraints of rational uses of the voice.²⁴

We have also seen, in this un-defining strategy through the name, the start of a different treatment of language in writing, which calls for a new reading practice, such as Horn's *Rings of Lispector*. The need to slip from the book onto space and the plastic medium, whose main material is not word, follows the experience with language the voice goes through, of finding its own utterances indecipherable, and of placing itself there where the word does not yield meaning. Consequently, the components of the piece are reorganized; every element becomes a transmitter. Just as words in *Água viva* and in *Rings of Lispector* communicate vibrant sensations, rubber communicates its flexibility and receptiveness to the reader/visitor whose feet are involved in exploring the text:

Parece-me que o mais provável é que não entendo porque o que vejo agora é difícil: estou entrando sorrateiramente em contato com uma realidade nova para mim e que ainda não tem pensamentos correspondentes, e muito menos ainda alguma palavra que a signifique. É mais uma sensação atrás do pensamento (44).

It seems that I don't understand probably because what I see now is difficult: I am subterraneously entering into contact with a reality that is new to me and that does not yet have corresponding thoughts, and even less a word that signifies it. It's more a of a sensation behind thought.

PART TWO

Lovers of Unknown's Brilliant Darkness

1. Speeches at the limits of language

Aesthetic experience here is concerned with the limit of language.²⁵ As I already said, looking at Horn's *Thames* photographs, the pre-cosmic character of the water figure they work

²⁴ See Lyotard's explication of this dimension of voice, *Phonè*, in "Voix," *Lectures*, and Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*.

²⁵ These impasses for the power of knowledge link the aesthetic experience here explored to the broader tradition of aesthetics in Western philosophy. From its introduction by Baumgarten, the term 'aesthetic' (from the Greek

with implies ante-predicative or nameless visions inasmuch as the world's creation is unfinished, not yet defined and bound by a final form. What to do when speech begins to quiver and stumble at the approach of the limit and upon catching a glimpse, perhaps, of the unlimited? The subject of reason might retrospectively account for the feeling and read the failure of representation through the scope of its own supersensible powers, without which no sense of the sublime would be possible to begin with. The subject of language, for whom "a thought is a proposition with sense," (Wittgenstein, Proposition 4) might give its book closure, with an aphoristic "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (Proposition 7). As for the negative theologian, grappling with the Divine, the strict observance of logical thinking will nonetheless keep language plowing, *ad infinitum*, a route of inadequate names for what exceeds thought, knowledge, linguistic constraint: "God." Lispector and Horn's aesthetic, as experience at the limits of language and thought, shares with apophatic discourse (as with the Presocratic philosophers) the insistence on working at this limit with words, instead of either simply doing away with them or conforming to the domain of the representable, resigned to the impossibility of passing the brink. In his analysis of the *via negativa* and its negative voice, Jacques Derrida detects "une certaine hardiesse apophatique qui consiste toujours à aller plus loin qu'il n'est raisonnablement permis. Voilà un des traits essentiels de toute théologie négative: le passage à la limite, puis le franchissement d'une frontière..." (*Sauf le nom* 18). 'a certain apophatic boldness that consists in always going further than what is reasonably allowed. Here is one of the essential traits of every negative theology: the passage to the limit, then the crossing of a border...' An

aistheta, pertaining to the senses) was set in the intelligible/sensible and form/matter binaries. What is known by the senses can only be less certain, clear, and distinct, than objects for reason. Following a tradition where the Platonic immaterial Forms have played a central role, and in the rationalist context within which the concept of the aesthetic developed, its field could only emerge in subordination to the other philosophical domains (ethics, epistemology, logic, metaphysics, etc.). Hence the adjective "confused" or "indistinct" Baumgarten used (advocating for a non-rational, affective apprehension) to express the sort knowledge that is possible through the senses, as opposed to in Cartesian terms, the "clear and distinct" immaterialities available to the mind alone.

“hardiesse” ‘boldness’ characterizes the negative voice insofar as its obstinacy at traversing the limit forces its discourse to recklessly run the risk of contradiction, beyond the frontier of what is “raisonnable” ‘reasonable.’ In the course of a few lines, *Água viva*’s voice announces the limit as prohibition and proceeds to traverse it:

Há muita coisa a dizer que não sei como dizer. Faltam as palavras. Mas recuso-me a inventar novas: as que existem já devem dizer o que se consegue dizer e o que é proibido. E o que é proibido eu adivinho. Se houver força. Atrás do pensamento não ha palavras: é-se. Minha pintura não tem palavras: fica atrás do pensamento. Nesse terreno do é-se sou puro êxtase cristalino. É-se. Sou-me. Tu te és. (27)

There’s a lot to say that I don’t know how to say. Words are lacking. But I refuse to invent new ones: the ones that exist must already say what can be said and what is forbidden. And what is forbidden, I divine. If there is force. Behind thought there are no words: one is-to-oneself. My painting has no words: It lies behind thought. In that ground of is-to-oneself I am pure crystalline ecstasy. One is-to-oneself. I am-to-myself. You are-to-yourself.²⁶

Contradiction is already an index of thinking past the laws or principles that structure cognitive operations (importantly, that of non-contradiction). The quote above manifests this revelry of language facing the limit, first, admitting to the lack of words, then refusing to invent new ones, but only if the existent ones are used for the sayable *and* the unsayable. In forbidden territory, if knowledge fails, then one must “*adivinhar*,” that is, start a new game with words so they will speak the forbidden. In this way, they can begin to designate an inconceivable place such as “behind thought,” and say about it, with words, that there are no words in it. And the voice responds to its own claims by proceeding to invent a pronominal function for the verb “to be.” The voice incurs in a-grammatical practices with the reader as accomplice;²⁷ both enter, with

²⁶ My translation of “é-se” tries to convey the ungrammatical construction Clarice Lispector is deliberately using here, as I explain after the quotation.

²⁷ The voice describes its strategy before what is forbidden in a manner striking to the pious ear. For “adivinho” invites the idea of heresy (divination is prohibited), which some exponents of Christian negative theology were accused of, in fact. As in other instances I’ve presented, the gesture distinguishes this voice from that of an obedient Christian discourse.

words, behind thought. The quotation demonstrates that when speech begins to stumble, there is room for the aesthetic, and the emergence of writing:

—escrevo por profundamente querer falar. Embora escrever só esteja me dando a grande medida do silêncio.

Sim, quero a palavra última que também é tão primeira que já se confunde com a parte intangível do real. (12)

—I write from wanting profoundly to speak. Although writing is only giving me the great measure of silence.

Yes, I want the ultimate word that is also so primordial that it already confuses itself with the intangible part of the real.

From this fragment of *Água viva* one gathers that writing – as aesthetic practice – strikes a relation in which the word does not suffocate or deny silence; as overwhelming as the great measure of silence may be for the voice that speaks it, the desire it expresses endures, and this desire is made of voice and silence, as much as of words. Writing happens when the word ceases to signify objects and turns into a way of brushing silence’s intangible reality, to the point of confusion. The word as “bait”:

Então escrever é o modo de quem tem a palavra como isca: a palavra pescando o que não é palavra. Quando essa não-palavra—a entrelinha—morde a isca, alguma coisa se escreveu. Uma vez que se pescou a entrelinha, poder-se-ia com alívio jogar a palavra fora. Mas aí cessa a analogia: a não-palavra, ao morder a isca, incorporou-a. O que salva então é escrever distraidamente. (20)

Writing, then, is the way of one who has the word as bait: the word fishing for what is not word. When that non-word—between-the-lines—bites the word, something was written. Once the in-between-the-line has been netted, one could with relief pull the word out. But the analogy ends there: the non-word, when it bites the bait, incorporated it. What saves then, is writing distractedly.

What saves, thinks the voice, is “writing distractedly,” to make sure the non-word incorporates the bait and the writer does not try to retrieve the word she has cast into the domain of the non-word. The desire fueling the whole process should be supreme if the word is to be so dramatically surrendered.

2. The aesthetic event as “object” of desire

Desire is also the structuring force in mystical theology. One of this discipline’s central metaphors, explains Denys Turner, is “the love of God as *eros*” a “soul” who strives to encounter God is its practitioner. The structure derives from that of ancient Greek philosophy, where the philosopher is one who yearns for *Sophia*, or knowledge. Turner explains the generation of this type of Christian theology as the result of combining the Hebrew and Greek traditions, patent in the works of Pseudo-Dionysus the Aeropagite.²⁸ In fact, as *The Song of Songs* and the *Phaedrus* dialogue show, for instance, both Hebraic and Greek literatures at some point stage the “seeker” as lover, and its beloved is the object of knowledge sought after. Philosophy and theology are structured as a quest for the unknown, implying gradual progression. Likewise, it articulates our constellation’s conception of the work of art. Instead of a product given once and for all, there is a weaving of moments or steps. As both discourses reveal, desire is fundamental to the processual character of the artwork. Instilling it is an important role of that aesthetic event, which the entire work of art is a quest for. Horn’s and Lispector’s pieces give “work of art” the sense of a gradual search fueled by desire. One of its recurrent sentence beginnings being “Quero” (“I want”), *Água viva*’s voice clearly and insistently asserts and projects, in its verbal/non-verbal flux directed to a “you,” its desiring state.

Together with Horn’s water pieces, the literary piece puts forth an idea of the aesthetic in which the work of art turns upon “an ungraspable.” The word plunges into the non-word so as to catch it, but no positive non-word can be gained from this process: the word as bait does not translate what is non-word, in the way that Roni Horn’s *Thames* photographs are useless to

²⁸ “...you *could* extract the main linguistic building blocks of the Western Christian tradition... from two stories, each foundational in the intellectual and religious cultures of its respective tradition: the ‘Allegory of the Cave’ in book 7 of Plato’s *Republic*, and the story in Exodus of Moses’ encounter with Yahweh on Mount Sinai... this conversion *did* happen and was consciously acknowledged to have happened by theologians both of Greek and Latin traditions” (11).

identify the river in England, or any kind of water found outside the piece. Again, owing to this “ungraspable” quality of what is desired, the artwork process somewhat, though not entirely, resembles negative theology and those Greek and Hebraic models grounding it. Since the conception of the work of art as production of the aesthetic experience of *now* critiques the metaphysics of presence constructed precisely by such models, the following paragraphs analyze the resemblances and tease out the distinctions.

In book X of Plato’s *Republic*, the distribution of reality into three levels assigns the lowest one to art, as imitation of the earthly realm, available to perception, which in turn only reflects the realest and truest realm—of Forms or Ideas. A direct apprehension of this world is unavailable to the soul, as long as it resides in the human body. While these immaterial Ideas, namely Beauty, animate the artist’s work, the latter will never capture Beauty as such, because of the materiality in which art is immersed. In turn, the story of Moses’ ascent to the mountain for conversation with God establishes the ban on seeing the latter’s face directly. Like the Greek form of Beauty, the Hebraic God is visually outside human reach. Although this scene presents as possible—if only for an elite—directly hearing the voice of God, deciphering the meaning of his words or pronouncing his name remain strictly beyond human limits.²⁹ As much as the divine power of speech is highly valued in Plato’s philosophy, when it comes to accounting for the realm of Forms, even Socrates admits before his friend Phaedrus that it is poets who take it upon themselves to honor “the place of Being, the Being that truly is – colorless, shapeless, and untouchable, visible to the mind alone, the soul’s pilot, and the source of true knowledge,” and however, “none of the poets here on earth have ever sung the praises of this place beyond

²⁹ On the ban on the name of God see Gn 32:29 and Ex 3:13. See also Pseudo-Dionysius. *The Divine Names*. 596A.

heaven, nor will any ever sing of it adequately.”³⁰ Metaphor, fable, and myth are imperfect supplements that step in when rational discourse is insufficient to convey the realm of the divine.³¹

3. Two ways with brilliant darkness

These notions of verbal inadequacy are internalized by negative theology, not only, says Turner, insofar as it shares some of these “negative images,” but also in its discursive method, grounded on “human ignorance of the nature of God.” (19) “Apophaticism” or the *via negativa* asserts “that we can have very little idea of what... things said of God *mean*. ... as one can tell from its Greek etymology: *apophasis* is a Greek neologism for the breakdown of *speech*, which in the face of the unknowability of God, falls infinitely short of the mark” (20). The dynamics of desire in play for negative theology take the shape of ascending steps towards an encounter with the beloved, which are at once the steps of the epistemological process of apprehension, from the senses all the way to reason. However, while possession of the object of knowledge would mark the endpoint of the cognizing effort, the movement in negative theology requires that the lover surrender its grasping powers of the mind. God eludes the proper status of object, since to know him as lover it is necessary to “un-know,” leaving even reason, the highest power of the mind, behind:

Indeed the inscrutable One is out of the reach of every rational process” claims Pseudo-Dionysus. “Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good, this One, this Source of all unity, this supra-existent Being. Mind beyond mind, word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name. (*Divine Names*, 588B)

Analogous to this renouncement of knowledge and of the power of reason before “the inscrutable One,” or “the Ineffable,” the word in *Água viva* is given over to a non-verbal water,

³⁰ 247 c,d, *Phaedrus*.

³¹ For an analysis of tension between mythos and logos in Plato, see Derrida “La pharmacie de Platon” *La dissemination*.

to the encounter “between-the-lines” where writing takes place. Moreover, Lispector’s text shares a particular oxymoron with negative theology: “brilliant darkness.” Dionysius the Aeropagite (late 5th to early 6th centuries, A.D.) begins his *Mystical Theology* by praying for the Trinity’s guidance to take the Christians “where the mysteries of God’s Word/ lie simple, absolute and unchangeable/ in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence” (997A-B). “The brilliant darkness of a hidden silence” is a kind of shelter for “the mysteries of God’s Word,” to which the readers of the Dionysian discourse are summoned in the above quoted prayer. *Água viva* also summons its reader, in this address:

Ouve-me, ouve o silêncio. O que te falo nunca é o que eu te falo e sim outra coisa. Capta essa coisa que me escapa e no entanto vivo dela e estou à tona de brilhante escuridão.
(14)

Hear me, hear my silence. What I tell you is never what I tell you but yes something else. Capture that thing that escapes me and yet I live from it and I am afloat on brilliant darkness.

Both texts ask that the reader hear words *within* their bed of silence, although in the first quote it is the theologian’s voice directing itself (and its readers) to that impossible location, which is the domain of “the mysteries of God’s Word.” Instead, the second quote places the speaking voice itself on the surface of brilliant darkness, whence it addresses a “you” which any reader becomes, rather than God (unless a divinization of the you is in play, but more on this later). This is a voice that owns and knows of its silence, but is neither self-contained nor the motor sparking and placing it on that surface. From the site of brilliant darkness it is in need of a “you’s” ear. What is at stake in this distinction?

According to the logic of the metaphors we have been tracing (for example, “non-word,” “brilliant darkness”), which outline whatever lies “beyond” a linguistic limit the transgression of which is at stake, the voice seems to situate itself already past the limit. And yet it is far from quietly resting. While the holy Word lies “simple, absolute, and unchangeable” – and this is why

Pseudo-Dionysus and the Christians address and love it – the voice in *Água viva* is “afloat,” suggesting a wavering motion also noticeable in the description of its own speech as furtive: never “simply what it is” (in the way God would say “I am Who I am”) “but yes something else.” Unlike the one in the *Mystical Theology*, this site of brilliant darkness does not offer a final rest to those yearning for it. In fact, if one finds the voice entreating the reader to listen to it and its silence, in a sort of prayer that shifts the power dynamic, it is because the place of brilliant darkness does not provide a sense of the “absolute,” which would satiate the voice and make its prayer unnecessary. Afloat on brilliant darkness, there is still “that thing which escapes me,” and only the reader (as we know, in an extraordinary practice) has power to “capture.” But it is crucial that the reader, as examined through *Rings of Lispector*, also grasp without grasping, without entrapping this “outra coisa” ‘other thing’ that refuses a name.

4. The materiality of “now”

This “other thing,” the non-object of the aesthetic experience as a desiring process, does not amount to the Christian, ineffable, God. So how to think what fascinates *Água viva*’s voice and wavers “behind thought” rather than, as Pseudo-Dionysus says, “beyond mind”?

Continuo com capacidade de raciocínio – já estudei matemática que é a loucura do raciocínio—mas agora quero o plasma—quero me alimentar diretamente da placenta. (9)

I still have the ability to reason –I have studied mathematics, which is the madness of reason —but now I want the plasma—I want to feed directly from the placenta.

For Pseudo-Dionysius and also, as shown here, for the voice in *Água viva*, as lover one must exceed or let go of reason. But the voice will surpass reason for a direct contact with “the plasma,” “the placenta,” constituting a new “object of study.” Unlike the Pseudo-Dionysian “unchangeable” God, what fuels this research with desire (beyond even “mathematics”) conveys organic life and matter. “Plasma” draws an as-yet unformed material (since the etymology

designates the matter to be formed or molded), and “placenta” the pre-natal structure of assimilation and nourishment. Names like these for that “other thing” or desired “non-object” connote some of the principles operative in the artwork and the aesthetic. The molding of formless material is a basic action in the plastic arts, and a shape is impressed onto matter by way of a primary receptiveness, which placenta as receptacle to a forming organism, and the state of “feeding from it” suggest. Receptiveness is also the condition under which (to refer again to modern epistemologies) the sensations are stirred, making perception and aesthetic feeling possible. The aesthetic involves sensibility, or receiving sensations. By offering this embryological image – “feeding directly from the placenta” – the text’s exploration of an unknown that is beyond reasoning, “intangible,” and “in-between-the-lines,” upholds the event of the aesthetic in a way also different from the sublime described by Kant, where reason, if negatively, triumphs over what surpasses the faculty of imagination. The aesthetic according to *Água viva* instead merges with the materiality of living, indissociable from mortality. In other words, it impresses the receptivity or affectivity of aesthetic feeling as the basis of all experience.³² Plasma also designates the *fluid* part of blood, lymph, milk, or intramuscular liquid.³³ Like water, placenta and plasma recall the amorphous at the origin of living which this chapter considered in the light of the Presocratic theories of first principles, once again, before “another fact appears in the world” ‘aparece mais um fato no mundo’ (32).

5. Immutability vs. The Prayer of Água Viva

Throughout *Água viva* the plasma/placenta image parallels the un-defining techniques of negative theology. Moreover, there is nothing wrong with the physicality of placenta to continue to fit the unending list of possible metaphors to inadequately name God; in fact, apophatic

³² The Kantian subject is undoubtedly receptive, but for him feeling is not the ground of ontology or epistemology. For a post-kantian, aesthetic vision of the world see Shaviro’s reading of Whitehead.

³³ See ‘plasma’ in Webster’s New World Dictionary.

discourse could use this raw, formless materiality to help bring about the necessary collapse of language that gives access to the “brilliant darkness beyond mind.” But negative theology still wants a God of Eternal Life, an omnipresent, immutable Truth. It is the important Platonist streak in the negative tradition that introduces an “emotion of distress at the mutability and instability of all things” (Turner 67). As much as the soul may progressively “detach from itself” in view of this encounter with God, and as much as this lover may recognize in his/her humanity perishable being, “the immutable light of Truth itself” enables the mind, first, to recognize it, and second, “to image that which transcends it” (77).³⁴ For, according to St. Augustine, the distinctive trait of the mind is its “self-presence,” in strict analogy to God’s Omnipresence and immutability. “Nothing is more immediately present to the mind than it is to itself” (*De Trinitate* 14.5.7. quoted in Turner, 81). Thus, even when this structure of the lover approaching its “object” of desire submits everything to process and gradual, sequential unfolding as opposed to instantaneous completion, the persistence of self-presence counterbalances temporal difference.

And therein lies the important difference to what Lispector’s and Horn’s works propose. If the title of Lispector’s text foregrounds living, the resistance to completion these works perform must, of course, also address death. The aesthetic for *Água viva* embraces change, mutability, death, perishing; the writing voice dramatically stages these issues in its process of pulsing from one phrase to the next, from one word to the following. Any such movement is fatal. As mentioned earlier, the now-instant enacts an “acende e apaga, acende e apaga,” “on and off, on and off.” Within the rhythmic laws of living, the event, and the art-making process, death inscribes itself too. It features among the following sequence of phrases, which could not perform the “pirilampo” ‘firefly’s’ “on and off” act without the period’s interruptive function:

³⁴ There are certainly several configurations of the soul and the exact coordinates of its relationship with the divine. See Turner’s Introduction in *The Darkness of God*.

Demonstro “aquilo.” Aquilo é lei universal. Nascimento é morte. Nascimento. Morte. Nascimento e—como uma respiração do mundo. (35)

I demonstrate “that.” That is universal law. Birth and death. Birth. Death. Birth and—like a breathing of the world.

While *the now* occurs a moment before fact settles down, a synchronization with it cannot be simply carried out by freezing this *now* before it passes away—via the snapshot—to become part of the factual. The demonstration of the indefinite, yet absolutely unique “aquilo” ‘that,’ presupposes perishing, in the very way that a sentence comes to an end. As the sequence demonstrates, each time the caesura is different. The last one insists on the strategy of incompleteness; to change the course of the phrase where the reader would expect repetition, the interruptive gesture that a period or “morte” as ending word carried out in preceding sentences here becomes a dash, shifting its tone to description. The *now*’s minuscule dimension, so to speak, is such that its birth and death are almost indiscernible, so near to each other they lie. Without death no inaugural *now* can surge forth, meaning that each *now* unlike any other must pass away (also in a singular fashion). And this can only be fascinating within Horn’s and Lispector’s processes, since death, as radical otherness, commands the estrangement and approach of life they seek: from life’s own point of view—and not the human subject’s—or with the world’s own breathing. “Construo algo isento de mim e de ti—eis a minha liberdade que leva à morte” (14) ‘I construct something exempt from me and from you—hence my freedom that leads to death.’

Water’s drowning and dissolving powers are just as pertinent as its lively instability and restlessness. After all, while the living watch the surface of the Thames it is suicides who discretely flow by becoming liquefied in its dark depths, as several footnotes in Horn’s *Another*

Water readily point out. Death and darkness are the *Thames*' enigmas these notes direct the viewer's attention to. The second footnote glossing a shot of the river explains:

² Disappearance : that's why suicides are attracted to it [water]. It's also why children fear it (...) It's a soft entrance to simply not being here. When I imagine the river, it's something I can enter, something that will surround me, take me away from here. (...)

While bringing viewers to recognize and acknowledge an essential component of the world they inhabit, Horn's pieces surpass the sudden manifestation of the quotidian in its neglected wondrousness, or delve so deep into this wondrousness that recognition, and the sense of familiarity correlative to inhabitation, cease to take place. What uncannily appears, looking at the water, is the viewer's own disappearance. "Disappearance" might seem shocking if, as I claim, this art piece operates within a project of not only desiring but also reaching and even experiencing the *now* as such. Why then, entertain a notion of absence ("not being here") and spatiotemporal deferral ("away from here")?

This point of tension reflects, exactly, the logic in which the metaphysical ideal of presence rests, since to attain it is to defeat such deferral. The viewing and imagining "I" performs its actions "within the form of time" (in a Kantian formulation) and is an "I" with the power of self-awareness. In other words, the "I" is present to itself. But any moment except the present is more or less absent, relying on memory and visualization of future moments. So while being within time carries the impossibility of full self-presence, imagining self-absence—as the *Thames* tempts suicides, children, and the first-person voice in the footnotes to do—brings the subject of consciousness to an impasse.³⁵ What the river image here unveils is the anchorage of viewing and being in a consciousness that exerts upon its surroundings the familiarity and

³⁵ In the words of *Água viva*: "Vou lhe contar um segredo: a vida é mortal. Vou ter que interromper tudo para te dizer o seguinte: a morte é o impossível e o intangível. De tal forma a morte é apenas futura que há quem não a agüente e se suicide." 'I'm going to tell you a secret: life is mortal. I'm going to have to interrupt everything to say the following: death is the impossible and the intangible. In such way is death barely future that there are those who can't stand it and commit suicide.'

recognition it obtains from immediacy to itself. But to enter the river is, one imagines, to become surrounded by a dissolving agent, a force capable of dispelling the subject's own capacity to recognize its world. One is on the verge of unknowing. Thus, unlike the metaphysical present correlative to self-presence, an alterity threatening the self's unity and cognitive powers is what the aesthetic event of *the now* has at stake for the viewer here. By way of immersion rather than distance, this estrangement is, in fact, the effect of the Thames photographs upon the viewer, reinforced by the utterly common status water tends to fall into, for instance as part of London's ordinary scenery.

Perhaps the most aggressive experience of water becoming strange that these photographs provoke in the eye and mind of the viewer addressed *qua* living being, is in the installation "Still Water (The River Thames, for Example)." A room's walls are covered by a series of 30 ½ x 40 ½ inch offset lithographs, at approximately eye-level. They appear quite large before the viewer's face, and nonetheless each myopic image's details, and especially the tiny footnotes that run along the bottom frame, draw the viewer very close to it, making it impossible to grasp the picture all at once. And if one does stand further away hoping to look at the whole picture (but not the footnotes), it is only a glimpse at a portion, at a moment, of what we know from the title to be much larger a water mass, although as mentioned earlier, it looks scarcely anything like it. Horn insists on the dangerous character of the river, how suicidal it is to enter it. The dissimilarities in texture and color between images affect the eye in multiple ways, depicting the heterogeneous nature of the river and distancing the viewer from its habitual associations for the notions of "water" and "river," by drawing her dangerously near, and surrounding her, since the photographs are displayed along a room's four walls.³⁶

³⁶ The installation process is an integral part of the work for Horn, no matter what the media. At the Tate Modern exhibit in 2009, this piece was set along the four walls of a room with a view to the river Thames. At the Whitney

Sometimes the image places the gaze on the more or less agitated surface, and others—when the texture turns smoother and blurrier—one has the feeling of having sunk just below it. Although a literally narcissistic gesture, looking into this surface of “black water,” as some of Horn’s footnotes call it, does not offer the viewer’s reflection, for the water is always different from itself, often dark and viscous in different ways. “A soft entrance to simply not being here,” explains one of the footnotes.



Figure 8. Roni Horn, *Dictionary of Water* (detail. “black water”) (2001) Offset lithograph, 30 1/2 x 41 1/2" (77.5 x 105.4 cm). Acquired through the generosity of Kathy and Richard S. Fuld, Jr. © 2011 Roni Horn. MOMA, New York: <http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=106692>

In the installation the images physically surround and immerse the viewer, making it more difficult to shut out the images’ vertiginous force. One may know the pictures are of the Thames, and may have directly stood at this river’s banks or bridges watching it flow, but what to call the specificity of each fleeting formation, the drawing that results from this unique rippling of a bit of water mass, without its own contours and extending as much as the paper will allow? Moreover, if this water dissolves “me,” who is this viewer that remains?

“Estou neste instante num vazio branco esperando o próximo instante” (48) ‘I am in this instant in a white void waiting for the next instant,’ writes the voice in *Água viva*. Nothing secures permanence to what exists; there is nothing but “um vazio branco” ‘a white void’ above

Museum of Modern art the room was instead without windows. In both cases the work conveyed a sense of being surrounded by the river’s course.

or beneath the flow of phrase and hope for another instant to shore up. The only imperishable thing is unlike Augustinian self-presence in the image of God's: "o tempo imutável e permanente. Nunca começou e nunca vai acabar. Nunca" (48) 'time, immutable and permanent. It never began and will never end. Never.' Therefore, writing "no amâgo do próprio instante" (49, my emphasis) 'in the marrow of the very instant' can only be extremely dangerous. And despairing—to the point of having to cry out to God in spite of being a nonbeliever, which happens in *Água viva*, without this cry being satirical: "Mesmo para os descrentes há o instante do desespero que é divino: a ausência do Deus é um ato de religião" (51) 'Even for nonbelievers there is the instant of despair that is divine: the absence of God is an act of religion.' This instant is divine, asserts the voice, and the prayer that follows such a claim says why. It begins:

Neste mesmo instante estou pedindo ao Deus que me ajude. Estou precisando. Precisando mais do que a força humana. (...) Que o Deus venha: por favor. ...Venha. Sou inquieta, e áspera e desesperançada. (...) Venha antes que seja tarde demais. Corro perigo como toda pessoa que vive. (51)

In this very instant I am asking the God to help me. I am needing. Needing more than human force. (...) Let God come: please. ...Come. I am restless and coarse and despaired. (...) Come before it's too late. I am in danger as any person who lives.

The hour of prayer is none but the extraordinary disclosure of "neste mesmo instante," of oneself living "in this very instant," which is inescapably lethal. Such is the divinity of the instant of despair. The novelty of the divine *now* is at every instant marked through repetitions of words: "Estou precisando." "Precisando..." and "venha..." "Venha." "Venha antes..." Why the need for "the God's" help here? How could God's arrival save the speaker? And from what? Earlier in the chapter there was a glimpse of the text's sense of "saving" in the passage on "fishing and netting" with the word the non-word. In a traditional understanding of how prayer functions, more so when the soul recognizes its mortal condition, as the voice does here, the answer would obviously be salvation from mortality, redemption from death, all this appeasing the soul's

disquietude, whereas the voice is a nonbeliever. But this is hardly the moment of a Christian conversion. If the divine emerges in the moment of despair, then wouldn't its consolation through God's arrival entail, absurdly, salvation from divinity? This prayer nonetheless, in a voice that hears itself and so feels itself living in "this very deadly instant," continues, and starts to deform that resurrectional image by adding:

E a única coisa que me espera é exatamente o inesperado. Mas sei que terei paz antes da morte e que experimentarei um dia o delicado da vida. Perceberei—
assim como se come e se vive o gosto da comida. (51)

And the only thing that awaits me is exactly the unexpected. But I know I will have peace before death and that I will experience one day the delicateness of life. I will understand—as the taste of food is eaten and lived.

"And the *only* thing that awaits me," the voice awaiting God asserts, having faith in "antes da morte" 'before death' and in "um dia" 'one day,' is "o inesperado" 'the unexpected.' But the efficacy of this prayer lies already in this very instant, since it is the now's deadliness (which is the voice's too) that discloses the future, the arrival of a necessarily different instant. Because the instant is deadly, despair will certainly end. So the voice's tone can become more hopeful, and transform into the peace it projects and into "o delicado da vida" 'the delicateness of life.' What takes place here is another kind of conversion. The voice can then confidently assert "perceberei," a unique word in Portuguese for "comprehension" or "clearly noticing" where "percepção" 'perception' resonates, making the action more sensorial than "understanding" with the disembodied mind alone. It will moreover perceive "assim como se come e se vive o gosto da comida" 'as the taste of food is eaten and lived.' Is the phrase as such not an experience of delicateness? For it is not merely a matter of finally understanding, once and for all. And not quite of eating food or even of living the experience of eating. "Perceber" is like eating and living *the taste* of food. A minimal displacement like this one returns us to the ungraspable,

considering the taste as perhaps the “essence” of the food and more ephemeral than what sight, touch and even olfaction can capture of it. To taste a food one most likely has to break into it, renounce its preservation. Certainly, something in this image, just as in the earlier “feeding directly from the placenta,” suggests the act of communion; the voice indeed strives to make some sort of contact. Furthermore, it is desired as an extraordinary experience (with “the delicateness of life”), and this is what I have been calling “the aesthetic event” around which the work of art is organized. The aesthetic event produces itself as an encounter with the “unexpected,” “God,” the Other—relating again to the structural narratives of the philosopher and the Christian soul as “lover.” So, to distinguish it from the Christian communion, here is the end of the prayer, with this finally direct address (until this moment it was ambiguous, between the second and third person):

Minha voz cai no abismo de teu silêncio. Tu me lêes em silêncio. Mas nesse ilimitado campo mudo desdobro as asas, livre para viver. Então aceito o pior e entro no âmago da morte e para isto estou viva. O âmago sensível. E vibra-me esse *it*. (51; my emphasis)

My voice falls into the abyss of your silence. You read me in silence. But in that unlimited mute field I unfold wings, free to live. Then I accept the worst and enter the marrow of death, and for this I am alive. The sensitive marrow. And that *it* vibrates on me.

As the voice hears itself fall, in this very instant of God’s absence or “o abismo do silêncio” ‘the abyss of silence,’ the apostrophic prayer addresses a “you,” and its repetition reveals that it invokes the reader, and the reader’s silence. The voice finds its reader in a great leap of faith because the reader cannot simply enter into dialogue and play the God who comes and responds to this voice *in person*. What the voice is capable of hearing is the reader’s silence; the voice can create a reader through the void it projects itself into, a reader whose silence forms a kind of lining on the void and gives space for the vocal flow to unfold and live: a kind of placenta. Only in this act of creation across the marrow of death, that is, the throwing of oneself into the

innermost depths of the deaf vacuum where nothing exists, not God, nor you, nor the voice, can the delicateness of life come afloat, the instant in which vibration blooms out of silence, where the voice and the reader come to life and meet as they could never do otherwise, not outside the text, or what one would call “in person;” the event can only take place at the “it” level or “in the marrow of the instant”: “nesse amêgo tenho a estranha impressão de que não perteneço ao gênero humano” (27) ‘in that marrow I have the strange impression of not belonging to the human genus.’

6. Immanence and “o *it*”

Outside the text and in person, one is always transcending and thereby disregarding the instant’s immanence, since one draws on resources that occlude it to be able to maintain personhood and humanity. “Mas há também o mistério do impessoal que é o “it”: eu tenho o impessoal dentro de mim e não é corrupto e apodrecível pelo pessoal que às vezes me encharca” (28) ‘But there is also the mystery of the impersonal that is the ‘it’: I have the impersonal within me and it is not corrupted and rotten by the personal that sometimes swamps me.’ Under this law of transcendence, time is conceived of and experienced in a way that swamps it, making the instant recoil. On the contrary, the only possible “transcendence” for *Água viva* is inhuman and impersonal: “A transcendência dentro de mim é o ‘it’ vivo e mole e tem o pensamento que uma ostra tem” (28) ‘The transcendence within me is the living and soft “it” and it has the thought that an oyster has.’ In the encounter that takes place in reading, this “it-transcendence” produces an unstable situation where only as long as the voice speaks does a reader live, and vice versa: “Desenrolo-me apenas no atual. Falo hoje – não ontem nem amanhã – mas hoje neste próprio instante precível” (24) ‘I unravel only in the actual. I speak today – not yesterday nor tomorrow

– but today in this very perishable instant.’ “It” is temporal immanence, and imminence. Only at such a brink of the instant does silence vibrate, brilliantly, darkly.

“[I]t é elemento puro. É material do instante do tempo. Não estou coisificando nada: estou tendo o verdadeiro parto do it. Sinto-me tonta como quem vai nascer” (32) ‘It is pure element. It is material of the instant of time. I am not objectifying anything: I am in true labor with the it. I feel dazed as one who is about to be born.’ In its pursuit of this event, *the now*, the aesthetic neither accepts self-transcendence, even when speaking of overstepping a limit of language, nor does it uphold anything remotely near to self-presence. Rather, “selfhood,” or “the personal,” is discarded in the work of art, here cast as irrational moment of labor. From the *now* emerges an *it* as single support or placenta for the “I” and “you” of the text that are before the human, before “um ele o ela” ‘a he or she’ (58),³⁷ before thought. Hence in the work of art the desired love encounter between “I” and “you” does come true – only at the cost of reason, self-consciousness, and knowing. Inventing a “you” from the void as we saw the writing voice do, is first of all necessary because the “I” this voice pronounces does not grasp itself entirely, as noted previously in its summons to the reader “capta essa coisa que me escapa...” ‘capture that thing that escapes me...’ The voice also observes “No momento de pintar ou escrever sou anônima,” (32) ‘In the hour of painting or writing I am anonymous.’ Anonymity dramatizes the discontinuities of the “I” who is a stranger to itself from one moment to the next, from one word or phrase to the following one, since there is no consciousness subtending that flow, and all at

³⁷ The distinction between what I have designated as a pre-cosmic “it” and what is “already a he or she” recurs in different examples throughout the text. In a treatise on flowers, the voice comments on the rose “Mas rosa não é it. É ela” (52) ‘But the rose is not *it*. It is she.’ Also: “Estrelícia é masculina por excelência (54).” ‘Bird of paradise is masculine par excellence.’ Here the text is interestingly not making these claims on the basis of grammatical gender in Portuguese, since the word flower is feminine and this is the gender applied to the adjective ‘masculine.’ Later, it discusses insects: “Formiga e abelha já não são it. São elas” (56). ‘Ant and bee are no longer *it*. They are she [plural].’ My emphasis. It is not so much that the now precedes sexual difference, as it is that it precedes *determination*. For Roni Horn, who claims “Drawing belongs to the family of androgyny,” drawing is perhaps at this *it* level.

once, as we will see shortly, it opens the possibility of the aesthetic event in as a love encounter that lets the other remain other.

The work of art here entails following the laws of that temporality it seeks, the time of the now. Now is nothing but the flashing, twinkling instant, like a fleeting, crystalline embodiment, or a ray of light reflecting on a water surface: “Parei para tomar água fresca: o copo neste instante-já é de grosso crystal facetado e com milhares de faíscas de instantes” (40) ‘I stopped to drink fresh water: the glass in this now-instant is made of thick crystal and with thousands of sparkling instants.’ As the slow, difficult assembly of the text published as *Água viva* attests, the work itself must consist of a condensation of these fleeting sparks of brilliant darkness. To the extent that cohesion between fragments in Lispector’s text was not planned, and that the written voice in each is an embodiment of that unique instant, the writing voice at each fragment differs from all the others; it is moreover impossible to calculate the temporal gap and even the order between them. This accidental origin of the text is, in fact, the method of Roni Horn’s drawings result from a long process of inscription with pencil and pigments, slicing up paper and gradually binding it again. By way of these cuts and binds, the surface of the drawing shifts from supporting the trace to making traces as well.



Figure 9. Roni Horn, *Through 4* (2007) Ink on paper 241.3 x 237.5 cm. Hauser & Wirth London.
<http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue15/ronihorn2.htm>

As for the pigment drawing, what the viewer finds assembled could not have issued from a continuous stroke. Horn does envision an eventual drawing as the result of these fragments and pieces of time inscribed, but control over the global drawing is given up by letting time participate so prominently in the drawing process.³⁸ Their articulation into the flow available to the reader is posterior, of course, born, in the case of *Água viva*, from the need to give the instants themselves the shape of a book.

7. Luring the reader

Living water is contained or imaged as book so as to attract the other to it, an invented other that will become its reader, without whom the text in turn cannot live. With its inextricable promise of knowledge, of truth, the book is a lure for its lover. Flowing on its lines the reader soon learns that the sequence will not lead to any target, that there is no plot and the improvising

³⁸ In this sense, in her drawings there is something architectural even when the canvas is flat, and also something “syntactic” that relates the process to the connection of particles in verbal articulation. These intersections of domains are a recurrent topic for Horn. See Herkenhoff “What is Drawing for Roni Horn?”

phrases are also culled somewhat impromptu, that one reads “um fac-símile de livro” (50) ‘a facsimile of a book.’ In *Água viva* the reader finds herself before “o livro de quem não sabe escrever: mas é que no domínio da mais leve fala não sei falar. Sobretudo falar-te por escrito...” (50) ‘the book of one who knows not how to write: but it’s that in the domain of the most subtle speech I don’t know how to speak. Especially speak to you in writing...’ Seduction is necessary to draw a reader to the book; living water shaped as book offers itself to those “thirsty for knowledge,” as it were. And once the reader is there, the book unmask itself, confessing its ignorance, particularly when it is a matter of speaking to “you” in writing, that is to say, in the now and at the *it* level.

But if the text has called and drawn a “you” to it, it is because this “you” is indispensable to realizing the ineffable point of view of life itself ‘a vida vista pela vida.’ Here the voice announces the condition under which the *now* can exceptionally take place:

Só no ato do amor – pela límpida abstração de estrela do que se sente – capta-se a incógnita do instante que é duramente cristalina e vibrante no ar e a vida é esse instante incontável, maior que o acontecimento em si: no amor o instante de impessoal jóia refulge no ar, glória estranha de corpo, matéria sensibilizada pelo arrepio dos instantes – e o que se sente é ao mesmo tempo que imaterial tão objetivo que acontece como fora do corpo, faiscante no alto, alegria, alegria é matéria de tempo e é por excelência o instante. (9-10)

Only in the act of love – by the clear, star-like abstraction of what is felt – is the unknown of the instant captured, which is firmly crystalline and vibrant in the air and life is that uncountable instant, larger than the event itself: in love the instant of impersonal jewel glitters in the air, a strange bodily glory, matter sensitized by the shiver of instants – and what is felt is at the same time as immaterial so objective that it happens as though outside the body, sparkling in the heights, happiness, happiness is the matter of time and is par excellence the instant.

The event of *now* produces itself the act of love, that is to say, in the above-discussed encounter between you and me at the *it* level, as opposed to the human one, and this means in a state of unknowing that attunes the lovers to the “unknown of the instant.” The unknown is not explained

away there, it just vibrates, making it possible to sense its truth, *as unknown*, and allowing the voice to plunge into that feeling with its own vibrant force. As we have found throughout the reading of fragments from this text, in speaking into the reader's ear the voice executes the instant. Thus, "and life is that unaccountable instant, larger than the event itself" does not step back to reflect on the instant's identity and figure out the secret cipher of the unknown algebraic factor, for it is uncountable, as its experience is impossible to recount outside the glittering instant that gives it consistency.

8. To know living water

It is thus in critical spirit that *Água viva* alludes through its title to that "living water" promised in John 4:1-30, which is a story about ignorance and non-recognition. Therein Jesus speaks to a Samaritan woman with whom he crosses paths next to a well, of "the living water" that only he, the Savior, can offer: "...those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."³⁹ A thirst for living water figures here the yearning for God as salvation, absolute presence or eternal life. Jesus admonishes the woman, since she fails to recognize him as none other than the provider of eternal life. Instead, she is shocked that this man who she only identifies as a Jew, would ask her to give him water from the well, given the Jewish custom of never sharing things in common with Samaritans. Despite the efforts of Jesus to show her she speaks with the Messiah himself, the woman fails to acknowledge him in his terms, so he accuses her and her people of heresy: "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews." (4:22) Christian discourse would probably distinguish this woman's ignorance of the Godly identity of Jesus from the mystical theologian's *docta*

³⁹ It is interesting to bear in mind that this is the apostle for whom "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the word was God, through whom all things came into being, that is, life" (1:1-4).

ignorantia, only achieved through the long process of the mind's ascent to its highest powers and finally beyond them, where unknowing is attained in the encounter with God. But insofar as the woman's inability to identify the Messiah prevents her from seeing and participating in eternal life, as from worshipping the known instead of the unknown, Lispector and Horn align the truth of the work of art to her position rather than the Messiah's.

For both artists the work of art involves contemplating unknown water and sharing it with the stranger. These footnotes in Horn's book of photographs *Another Water* ask their reader:

²³ Is the Thames a case of mistaken identity?

²⁴ When you say water, what do you mean?

Like Lispector's piece, Horn's footnotes in *Another Water* and *Still Water* address a "you;" they invent and rely on a reader for the production of their estranging effect. As the quotes show, address to the "you" insists on the interrogative form, unsettling identity, meaning, and knowledge usually taken for granted. I have already said that the water the photographs show reveals its strangeness to the viewer to the point of experiencing a vision of something not definable, to which no given name corresponds. For this reason, footnotes 197 and 198 come up with a new word to define the phenomenon in view:

¹⁹⁷ Anhydrony is waterless water, the opposite of water. The form remains liquid but the substance is altered—replaced with another identity. Anhydrony is dry water.

¹⁹⁸ Anhydrony is not a recognized word. Its non-existence points to the difficulty of accepting its meaning.

Much like "brilliant darkness," "anhydrony" stands for a paradox, indicating the notion of water as ineffable, and the interest of the piece in bringing the reader to the limits of the thinkable.

Estrangement is also what a book of footnoted photographs, that is, footnoted water-surfaces effect, insofar as they cast the image as main text, turning the viewer into a reader of something other than the words in that lower margin. Again, the body of the page is not made of words; the

reader meets the challenge of reading water, more specifically, an instant of water, which is not already past, but only in the moment of encounter with its reader. Addressing this reader insistently, the footnotes make the reader linger before each photograph much longer than it would without the dialogue at the riverbank that always returns the reader's eye to the water, with questions like the one in footnote 194: "Have you seen this water before?" If the reader returns to the footnotes after pondering on the last question, 195, "Have you noticed that this water is barely reflecting light?" will only prolong the contemplation, and so forth. In the installation *Still Water* (1999) the tiny numbers to which the footnotes correspond are even scattered on the water surface, prompting an exercise of location that discloses viewing as a meditative experience of posing the gaze on a fixed point of the water surface, as if to "hear" the thoughts written in the footnotes. In fact, the reader/viewer ends up serving as the medium that connects the meditation in the footnotes to the water they contemplate from the riverbank along the bottom side of the picture.

9. Sources for a hydrologist

Clearly, these works give great importance to the reader, but not to quenching her thirst for knowledge, which is however taken into account, as the scholarly custom of the footnote indicates. Instead of clarifying, we have seen how the footnotes interrogate the reader and start it on a new reading practice, the reading that makes the aesthetic event of *now* take place. Like the book facsimile *Água viva*, these water texts lure the reader with the promise of knowledge but drive her astray, somewhere behind thought. This is why the *Thames* photographs are also gathered in the large *Dictionary of WATER*, which the lover of definitions, perhaps disturbed by the footnotes' aggressive interrogation of her knowledge of water, should find appealing. Water here is neatly framed, as if adhering to the principle of clear limits that make definition possible. This time there are no footnotes, just the picture of water and the white margins of the

rectangular, unnumbered page. All back pages are left blank. Released from the disruptive dialogue the footnotes draw the reader into, can we now see water clearly, face to face, for what it truly is? This *Água viva* quote might comment on the wordless dictionary experience:

O ato de ver é inefável. E às vezes o que é visto também é inefável. E é assim certa espécie de pensar-sentir que chamarei de “liberdade”, só para lhe dar um nome. Liberdade mesmo —enquanto ato de percepção—não tem forma. E como o verdadeiro pensamento se pensa a si mesmo, essa espécie de pensamento atinge seu objetivo no próprio ato de pensar. (...) Acontece que o pensamento primário—enquanto ato de pensamento—já tem forma e é mais facilmente transmissível a si mesmo, ou melhor, à própria pessoa 81 que o está pensando; e tem por isso—por ter forma—um alcance limitado. Enquanto o pensamento dito “liberdade” é livre como ato de pensamento. É livre a um ponto que ao próprio pensador esse pensamento parece sem autor. (81-2)

The act of seeing is ineffable. And sometimes what is seen is also ineffable. And it is thus a sort of thinking-feeling that I will call “freedom,” just to give it a name. Freedom itself—as act of perception—has no form. And since true thought thinks itself, that sort of thought reaches its objective in the very act of thinking. (...) It so happens that primary thought—as act of thought—already has form, and is more easily transmissible to itself, and better yet, to the person thinking it; for this—for having form—its reach is limited. As for the thought called “freedom” it is free as an act of thought. It is free to the point that to its own thinker the thought seems without an author.

Without page or footnote numbers, the long series in the dictionary becomes uncountable,⁴⁰

adding, according to *Água viva*, to the feeling of incommensurability:

...o pensar-sentir (...) encontra-se *agora* perto da grandeza do nada. Poderia dizer do “tudo”. Mas “tudo” é quantidade, e quantidade tem limite no seu próprio começo. A verdadeira incomensurabilidade é o nada... (82; my emphasis)

...thinking-feeling (...) finds itself *now* close to the grandeur of nothingness. I could say of “everything.” But “everything” is quantity and quantity has limit in its very beginning. True incommensurability is nothingness...

Page after page, no words appear to give definitions of water; but the dramatic differences in texture, color, and light from one image to the next, all uniformly framed, produce in the reader the sensation of being offered something more than specific, of holding in her hands the container of every possible water instant, as a language dictionary should carry every possible

⁴⁰ In this sense the Dictionary of Water evokes Kant’s mathematical sublime where “a determinate relation to the infinite, expressible in numbers [which] is impossible” (§26).

word. And yet, each photograph is impossible to narrate, to take away from the moment of viewing and use at one's discretion. One closely holds nothingness then, as *Água viva* calls true incommensurability. Even if some dictionary photographs appears more than once, in the same way some phrases reappear in *Água viva*, it is neither the same image nor the same phrase, for this moment of encountering it is different from the last one, and that is precisely where the singularity of the aesthetic event lies. Against so much white, so many pages of water, and not a single word, the dictionary's reader, transfigured, faces the ineffable *now*.

Water in Horn's pieces wraps itself in these alluring scholarly covers for the lover of knowledge because two are absolutely necessary, in order for this aesthetic event so crucially engaged with the unknown to take place; for as the chapter has shown, this event is an encounter that unpredictably creates the instant. "O próximo instante é feito por mim? Ou se faz sozinho? Fazemo-lo juntos com a respiração" (9) 'The next instant is made by me? Or is it made on its own? We make it together with breath.' "Me," and the instant on its own, and "you" make the instant, and the work of art is the work of this creation exceeding all meaning, plot, intelligibility, and grasp. "Só no ato do amor" 'only in the act of love,' that is, only in the encounter of two strangers, one of which is the viewer/reader taking on the textual "you," only thus is the unknown of the instant "caught" flashing by.

The *Thames* photographs make water readable, though not decipherable, as instants of brilliant darkness. But the deepest immersion of the viewer's own breathing, pulsing temporality, in the experience of water's boundlessness at the limit of language, happens "through a glass, brightly": in Horn's *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* (2007). So we will go there now, as if leading the scholarly philosopher to the ultimate destination, and recapitulate the ideas of work of art and aesthetic event in the *Água viva* constellation.

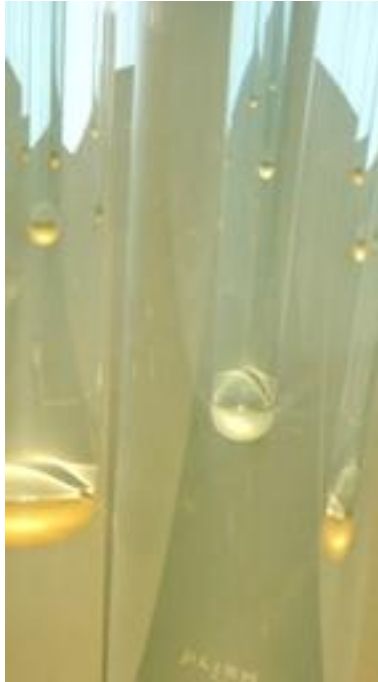


Figure 10. Roni Horn, *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* (detail; view through a glass column filled with water) (2007). Personal Photo by author. May 19, 2009.

“Mas agora estou interessada pelo mistério do espelho” ‘But now I am interested in the mystery of the mirror.’ Instead of dropping the imperfect mirror for the face-to-face encounter, as Paul suggests in Corinthians, Lispector’s text comes up with a mirror artifice to make *the now* glimmer at its source.

...para se ter a mina faiscante e sonambúlica: bastam dois, e um reflete o reflexo do que o outro refletiu, num tremor que se transmite em mensagem telegráfica intensa e muda, insistente, liquidez em que se pode mergulhar a mão fascinada e retirá-la escorrendo de reflexos dessa dura água que é o espelho. (70-1)

...to have the glimmering somnambulistic mine: two suffice, and one reflects the reflection of what the other reflected, in a tremor that transmits itself in an intense, mute, insistent telegraphic message, liquidity into which the fascinated hand can be dipped, and retrieved dripping with reflections of that hard water that is the mirror.

Once again, *the now* it is not a matter of a consciousness witnessing the aesthetic event, but rather of “life seen by life” or “the mirror seen by the mirror.” In other words, seeing aesthetically happens “behind thought.” This site is here and in *Vatnasafn/Library of Water*

composed as a “glimmering somnambulistic mine” of irreducible, incommensurable unknowns silently communicating an unintelligible message, that is, upholding the *now*, which in French one could state with a reiterative “maintenant (le) maintenant.”

Quem olha um espelho, quem consegue vê-lo sem se ver, quem entende que sua profundidade consiste em ele ser vazio, quem caminha para dentro de seu espaço transparente sem deixar nele o vestígio da própria imagem—esse alguém então percebeu o seu mistério de coisa. Para isso há de surpreendê-lo quando está sozinho, quando pendurado num quarto vazio, sem esquecer que a mais tênue agulha diante dele poderia transformá-lo em simples imagem de uma agulha, tão sensível é o espelho na sua qualidade de reflexão levíssima... (71-2)

One who sees a mirror, one who succeeds in seeing it without seeing themselves, one who understands that its depth consists in its being empty, who walks into its transparent space without leaving in it the trace of their own image—that one then understood its thingly mystery. For this one must catch it when it is alone, when hanging in an empty room, without forgetting that the slightest needle before it could transform it into a simple image of a needle, so sensitive is the mirror in its quality of featherweight reflection...

In *Vatnasafn/Library of Water*, Roni Horn installed water to mirror water and produce the infinite mine of glimmering reflections. One who visits this semi-permanent installation walks into a transparent space. The scholar, a hydrology researcher perhaps, is delivered to an unusual library visit, where no books are to be found, not even those specialized in water. Once the town library in Stykkishólmur, Iceland, today twenty-four glass columns standing from floor to ceiling occupy this place. Each clear column is filled with the clear water extracted from a different Icelandic glacier. Thus, assembling this component of the library called *Water, Selected* (2007) implied trips to each of these glaciers to collect the liquid, and a displacement and recomposing of the landscape within the library, according to the same method Horn follows in her drawing process considered earlier, of “dismembering” units of paper and bodies of color on a canvas, and then gradually reassembling the fragments to form a new, articulated surface. In this way, *Water, Selected* produces an architectural text by collecting and juxtaposing passages from the Icelandic landscape. Recalling an ancient Greek temple, the columns are set across the building’s

main/viewing floor; the visitor can then move between them and reflections between columns are produced. Mirroring each other, these waters, whereby the Icelandic landscape has been placed inside the library, also mirror the water outside, since the harbor's seawater lies on the other side of the large building windows. The building gives the impression of a lighthouse, not only in standing on a hill that overlooks the harbor, but in the complex play of reflections that takes place in it through glass.

As the *Água viva* quote above contends, the slightest needle can transform the mirror into the image of a needle, whereby the mirror itself is lost. *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* works with this fact to produce, from all elements entering and altering the mirror-room, the mystery of the empty mirror that interests Lispector and Horn. Removing one's shoes at the entrance of *Vatnasafn* is required; beyond the interest of preserving the light orange colored floor, which is a component of the installation called *You are the Weather* (2007), this allows one's feet to encounter the texture of rubber (as in *Rings of Lispector*), stretching across the entire room and everywhere scattered with yellow loose words inlaid in English and Icelandic. It is as if the visitor of this library were the one walking, or rather swimming through the mirror's depth without leaving a trace.

As this chapter has explained, the "you" or "it" who undergoes the aesthetic experience and the *now* do not exist beforehand; the work of art consists in create them in their ephemeral nature of events, as opposed to stable, substantial beings. Human visitors, whose bodies do reflect and multiply on the glass columns, do not provide the stable point of view where the event is synthesized. Preventing the viewer's fall into the position of detached spectator is one of the privileges of installation art. Visitors are submerged in between multiple waters, embodying momentary reflections or passing rays of light. Reading words on this room is a play of

reflections too, since they are adjectives that describe weather and mood, so while readers run their eyes through each word, it seems to cast them in its own gleam, for the brief span of time the reading action lasts.



Figure 11. Roni Horn *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* (detail. “glettið” “gorgeous”). Personal Photo by author, May 19, 2009.

Insofar as adjectives such as “clear,” “brutal,” “dyntótt” ‘capricious, unpredictable,’ “gjöful” ‘bountiful,’ “glettið” ‘frisky, playful,’ “gorgeous,” “nasty,” “tranquil,” fit not only human moods but also the weather, they decenter the human in this cohabitation with other elements.⁴¹

Moreover, setting words on the floor, as in *Rings of Lispector*, obviously demands a different physical engagement with the text, and poeticizes the text as an inhabited dwelling space, which in this case shelters a combination of scales. Interspersed like the columns across the room, the words on the rubber tiles draw attention to the lit bases of the water columns, where sediments form micro-landscapes. Despite the anthropocentric background of weather glossary that the words also highlight, their way of speaking to the reader not only of her changing, passing, metamorphic self but also of the changing weather, undermines the idea of human autonomy and

⁴¹ Translations come from the glossary in Horn, *Vatnasafn/Library of Water*. London: Artangel/Steidl, 2009.

emphasizes the agency of weather upon the visible.⁴² In Iceland the variation of light is particularly striking, first, since depending on the season there may be either no night or no day at all, and second, since the weather is remarkably “dyntótt” ‘capricious, ‘unpredictable.’ If the library is par excellence quiet and so is the water standing still behind glass, time is however not stopped, and the water continues alive, vibrating and visually altering space. Visiting readers at the *Library of Water* enter the work of art and help create it by participating, as reflectors and reflections of embodied instants, in the silent production of the incommensurable gleaming *now*, from the point of view and voice of “life itself.”

⁴² In this way the artwork comments on alarming weather changes such as global warming, which is the product of an anthropocentric understanding of the world. The melted glaciers are an index of this phenomenon, which underlines the non-eternity of earthly life resources.

CHAPTER TWO

Fragments d'une femme amoureuse: Marguerite Duras on The Work of Writing

Tomber amoureux: toutes les images de la chute: aux mains des ennemis, dans la maladie (tomber malade), épilepsie (haut mal); fauter (chute morale), tomber aux pieds, aux genoux. (...) Chute→
blessure, c'est à dire béance, ccntrale, radicale. Ruysbroek: "La moelle des os, où résident les
racines de la vie, est le centre de la blessure"
—Roland Barthes. "Ravissement" "Problèmes de l'énonciation: le discours amoureux."¹

The 1979 short film *Césarée* and the 1971 experimental novel *L'amour* are two works by Marguerite Duras and the object of this chapter. They correspond to a moment in which the author fully turned to cinema and, after *L'amour*, suspended her production in the novel genre for about a decade.² The last of a trilogy of novels whose afterlife took place in cinema, and the last novel as such before Duras' sustained filming period, *L'amour* is itself apocalyptic in plot, presenting personae who seem to have lost their roles on a bare, repeatedly destroyed stage—the beach. Narrative seemed inadequate to an authentically creative writing; portraying and performing in language the dissolution of ipseity and of an existing social order as the tenets of subjectivity was crucial.³ Words had to operate in close relation to silence,⁴ speech on the verge of exhaustion, and, correlatively, the image of the city as a dissolving subject's milieu needed to be razed to the ground. Only by erasing what was already written on the page's and ground's

¹ Séminaire II (1975-1976) *Le discours amoureux, suivi de Fragments d'un discours amoureux: inédits* (Paris: Seuil, 2007).

² Chalonge describes this period as one in which "l'auteur filme avant d'écrire" (66). 'the author films before writing.' *Espace et récit de fiction: Le cycle indien de Marguerite Duras*.

³ See *La destruction la parole*, Jacques Rivette's and Jean Narboni's 1969 interview of Duras in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 217: 45-57. "Je ne peux plus lire des romans. A cause des phrases..." (45) 'I can't read novels anymore. Because of the sentences...' (*Destroy She Said*, 91). The skeptical position towards ipseity and social reality is shared with other French intellectual figures at the time, to a certain extent related to the social revolution in 1968 and its outcome. The literary production steered away from narrative, and to a minimalist style, notably in the nouveau roman and in authors such as Beckett and Blanchot. For a reflection upon this turn see Blanchot's *L'entretien infini*, where he discusses Duras among other writers.

⁴ As Madeleine Borgomano notes in her article "Écriture du silence ou vertige de l'indicible?" the formulation of Duras' work as "a writing of silence" has been widely studied and has almost become a commonplace, and yet it remains necessary in order to approach the specificity of Duras' style. *Limites du langage: indicible ou silence*.

surfaces could there be room for writing. For Duras, since her 1950 novel *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* the emblematic image of this was the sea erasing the land, its memory, and any possible functional, survival oriented construction or practice (in that story a rice field in Vietnam by the ocean, which a single mother of three tried to cultivate and live from). A work in between cinema and text to open gaps between the visual and the verbal, and a kind of writing where silence could surface, were the result of this search for a space of creation. Desire and sexuality are fundamental questions in all of Duras' oeuvre; they are crucial to the subject's life as her writing presents it in text and cinema. Femininity, as this chapter will show, bears a specific mode of desire; a singular *love* (as Duras' entire oeuvre names it time and again) whose distinctive trait is an intimate link to the limits of language as the opening to a path of creation. If dissolving a pre-established subjectivity and writing is at stake in authentic creation, then so is dissolving predetermined positions in reading and viewing. The emergence of a feminine reader and viewer are, I submit, an essential part of the work of writing, so this chapter will show how *Césarée* and *L'amour* carry it out.

In her 1979 short film *Cesarée*, Marguerite Duras returns to Jean Racine's 1670 tragedy *Bérénice*. The latter is based on the romance between Palestinian queen Bérénice and Titus, son of the Roman Emperor and agent of the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (70 CE); it stages Bérénice's exile and separation from Titus when he succeeds his father, as Roman law forbids foreigners and monarchs to rule. But her name is never pronounced in *Césarée*; the script, spoken in the film by Duras herself in voice-over, instead refers to the protagonist as, for instance, "la femme reine de la Samarie" 'the woman queen of Samaria,' and spells out her unmistakable situation: "repudiée pour raisons d'état" 'repudiated for reasons of state.' Whereas the script recapitulates the tragedy's main points in a few terse phrases, it employs multiple

circumlocutions of the name Bérénice.⁵ The omission is intentional; her name's absence emphasizes the fact that her destiny is to dissipate:

*Il n'en reste que la mémoire de l'histoire
et ce seul mot pour la nommer
Césarée
La totalité.
Rien que l'endroit
Et le mot⁶*

*What is left of it is but the memory of the story
and this single word to name her
Césarée
The totality
Nothing but the place
And the word*

Nothing from the great tragedy is preserved, except for “the memory of the story” and Césarée, one word “pour la nommer” – to name “her.” Césarée, the French name for the city where the historical woman Bérénice lived and reigned until she abandoned it to follow her lover Titus to Rome, is still a city today in Israel and it preserves the ruins from the Roman era. And yet, the film's viewers find neither a reconstruction of its Roman days, nor this city's ruins today, nor an actress representing the Samaritan queen in love with Titus, who must renounce her when his turn comes to rule over Rome. During the ten minutes the film lasts the camera quietly focuses on outdoor sculptures of female bodies—by Aristide Maillol in the Tuilleries gardens (Figs. 12 and 14), and two by Louis-Denis Caillouette, each named after a French city (Figs. 13 and 15), whose seats are two corners of Paris' Place de la Concorde; the Obelisk at the center of this

⁵ Christiane Blot-Labarrère suggests the cause of this strategy to be a celebration of Bérénice. “De Césarée à Roma”, Marguerite Duras dans les forêts de Racine” *Les lectures de Marguerite Duras* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2005), 18. Conversely, Renate Günther explains that “Berenice is stripped of her proper name and even of the female pronoun ‘elle’ whose frequent omission in the text further emphasizes her loss of self” *Marguerite Duras* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 46.

⁶ Duras, Marguerite. *Le navire Night – Césarée – Les mains négatives – Aurélia Steiner – Aurélia Steiner – Aurélia Steiner* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1986), 95. Italics in the original text. Translations for Duras' texts throughout the text are mine unless otherwise noted.

octagonal plaza; and the river Seine's rippling surface reflecting Parisian building façades. The intriguing choice of these particular landmarks will be examined shortly. While they appear on the screen, Duras' voice speaks from behind the camera, accompanied by a violin's melancholy chords. Why is Bérénice absent from the screen? Is her absence what we see? But this would suppose she is elsewhere, and the script implies that she is no more; all that is left of her is remainders, fragments: "rien que l'endroit et le mot" 'nothing but the place and the word.' In Racine's play Bérénice was part of a love triangle that dissolved without any two remaining together at the expense of a third, and she had a voice. These were her last words, pronounced at the brink of disappearing from both men's view:

Servons tous trois d'exemple à l'univers
De l'amour la plus tendre et la plus malheureuse
Dont il puisse garder l'histoire douloureuse. (1502-4)

...Let us, all three, exemplify
The most devoted, tender, ill-starred love
Whose grievous history time will e'er record.⁷

After this painful separation of lovers, in Duras' film Bérénice no longer has a voice of her own. In contrast to the Barthesian *amoureux* from *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, the *femme amoureuse* as Duras' portrays her, is not the subject saying, however discontinuously and fragmentarily, "*Je*, qui est le pronom de l'Imaginaire" (611) 'I, the pronoun of the Imaginary.' More radically, the *amoureuse* manifests herself as the void where the imaginary crumbles. If the form of tragedy is like an edifice whose own internal structure destines it to fall so that it may be accomplished, then the end of tragedy—and particularly of one whose structure bears a woman's name—is the place where Duras' writing starts.

⁷ All translations of *Bérénice* are by John Cairncross. *Andromache and Other Plays*. Penguin Classics: London, 1967.

In *Césarée*, Racine's *Bérénice* suffers a decantation in which the sediments of the latter, that is, everything that settles, sets, and constitutes a ground, remains in the confines of that text, while the vacant place and its feminine name are poured, as it were, into the script of *Césarée*. It is the very gesture of *Bérénice* finally being cast to sea. Destruction is dissolution for Duras, and writing, far from opposing it, advances with this force, as this chapter will show.

*Emmenée en exil sur le vaisseau romain,
la reine des Juifs,
la femme reine de la Samarie.
Par lui.*

*Lui.
Le criminel
Celui qui avait détruit le temple de Jérusalem. (97)*

*Driven to exile on the Roman boat
The queen of the Jews
The woman queen of Samaria
By him*

*Him.
The criminal
The one who had destroyed the temple of Jerusalem*

To the extent that the Roman colonization of Palestine, the destruction of the second Temple of the Jews, and an exile from Rome of the Samaritan queen who abandoned her people for love of Titus are at stake, *Césarée* is also a process of deterritorialization in space and language, through ineffability as the center of writing. These operations allow the writer and director to advance *a unique idea and experience of love borne by an also unprecedented feminine subject*.⁸

⁸ It is, of course, crucial to avoid equating femininity and ontological womanhood. Femininity as Duras presents it is intrinsic to a creative, literary operation in language, and not to biological or even social identity, which is why I qualify the feminine subject in question here as "unprecedented." As feminist, structuralist, deconstructive, and psychoanalytic critics, among others have shown, is clear that ontology models its subject, being, upon a patriarchal, male-centered order. When brought against the historical role of woman in Western (and non-Western) civilization(s), ontology's economy does not fit women so well, first of all because, as Virginia Woolf stated in 1929, for the longest chain of generations women were not the owners of money, property, time, etc. (and how can they write without a room of their own? she asks). Meanwhile, the tradition of ontology—relating back to Ancient Greek culture, where Athenian citizenship presupposed ownership of goods (among which are women)—posits the

Love is the idea Duras' writing tirelessly strives to think, so in section two of this chapter ("Anagrams") we will turn to the 1971 experimental novel she simply called *L'amour*. As I said it is the third in a sequence of novels that share characters, location, and memories, but unlike the others, this one, closely resembling *Césarée*, strongly conveys an emptying out of ornamentation in language, memory, and the city by the sea where the action, which is also scarce, takes place. Its narrator is limited to describing the ongoing scene in an almost impersonal way, similar to Duras' disembodied voice in *Césarée*. While in Racine's piece, written in verse, the flux of speech is modulated by prosody and meter, *Césarée* is organized and read as free verse, shaped by silences that break the phrases' continuity. For both Racine and Duras love carries silences that place a limit on the personae's speech.⁹ In *Bérénice*, for example, Titus talks to his confidant about his difficulty to announce to Bérénice, the woman he loves, that she must leave.

(...) Vingt fois, depuis huit jours,
J'ai voulu devant elle en ouvrir le discours;
Et, dès le premier mot, ma langue embarrassée
Dans ma bouche vingt fois a demeuré glacée. (473-6)

...For a whole week,
I've tried to broach the question to the queen.
A hundred times, at the first word, my tongue
Clove to my mouth, speechless, a hundred times.

Frozen and thwarted, the status of Titus' *langue* (both tongue and language) in these lines prefigures the end of the piece that the lover's separation will bring, where, literally, not a line is left to say... unless words—and cinematic images—come to uphold this separation as the field of love. This is precisely what happens in Duras' pieces, where, as the omission of Bérénice's

mind or soul as a form of self-mastery. Deleuze and Guattari will thus oppose, to the "molar" economy of being, the minor, or "molecular" logic of becoming, starting with becoming-woman, which the present chapter shows to be in tune with Duras' feminine destruction. For a genealogy of the problem of femininity from the ethical perspective of hospitality, from the Old Testament to psychoanalysis, see McNulty.

⁹ Racine specialists note this characteristic as particular to *Bérénice*. Citing Roland Barthes, Greenberg writes "the symbolic register, [which] in this most "aphasic" of dramas appears in the difficulty experienced by the characters in breaking out of their silence, in speaking" (148 and n. 39).

name in *Césarée* shows, and as we will find in *L'amour*, these effects of broken and arrested speech will become central.

Duras treats these textual qualities as the material condition of love's reality, as the tissue where its diaphanous nature gains consistency. Writing in Duras thus names a kind of work where femininity, place, language, and love produce together a transient subject and the site of its experience. Her writing thinks love in a singular way: to conceive of love is to experience it. Love is an affect, that is to say, an idea unthinkable without the intervention of sensations, especially optical: "Je ne sais pas si l'amour est un sentiment. Parfois je crois qu'aimer c'est voir" (*Emily L.*, 139) 'I'm not sure love is a feeling. Sometimes I think that to love is to see.' To read her idea of love one must also consider how she makes it visible on the screen, and if one comes to see love as she conceives it, then her text, in between the verbal and the visual, will have transmitted it to one's eyes. Love constitutes the aesthetic event, *entre l'oeil et la langue*.¹⁰

This love event and the ways in which visual, cinematic, and textual components support it, are revealed in a literary space that shelters the ruins of two cities—Caesarea and S.Thala—indissociable from a woman. Aside from the novel's title, S.Thala is the only proper name in *L'amour*. Duras' oeuvre globally insists on love as causing the amorous subject's dissipation into a place, more precisely into a ruined territory's name, to the point of their becoming indistinct, and simultaneously propelling an evacuation of this site. As this happens, everything slips into a strange temporality. While *Césarée* dwells on the end of Racine's *Bérénice*, *L'amour* is placed after the end of the central scene in Duras' 1964 *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, that is, after a ball night in a casino by the beach, where Lol V. Stein experiences the end of time and self when her fiancé leaves her for another woman (I will discuss this in more detail further on). The two

¹⁰ "in between the eye and language/the tongue." *Langue* implies that, as tongue, language is eroticized, just as the tongue's eroticization is what makes it an organ for pleasure; the pleasure of taste, of love, and of speech.

female characters' traumatic scenes originate movements of dissipation, a kind of "becoming-seaside" in Durasian writing.

I. Césarée. Rien à voir (ni entendre) que l'amour

*L'endroit est plat
face à la mer
la mer est au bout de sa course
frappe les ruines
toujours forte (96)*

*The place is flat
Facing the sea
The sea is at the peak of its course
Beats against the ruins
Still strong*

To see is to love according to Duras, but what is there to see at the Durasian desert seaside, that propels the author's incursion into the medium of cinema? The quotation situates Caesarea's ruins by the sea, but although Duras takes her writing to the screen, the seaside is never shown. Instead, medium shots slowly sweeping over Aristide Maillol's bronze sculptures of female bodies at the Tuileries gardens in Paris on a hazy morning; still close-ups of a monumental sculpture of a seated woman behind scaffolding in different angles; an extreme close-up of hieroglyphs on the Obelisk; and momentary reflections of buildings on the surface of the Seine captured by the camera sailing down the river. It is not, of course, that an ordinary Parisian day serves as satisfactory illustration of the city in ruins or the city of love (in spite of its reputation). While one can establish correspondences between some of these visual elements and the vocally depicted scene,¹¹ illustration is of minor interest in dealing with love in the cinematic medium, particularly with the singular idea of love a Durasian poetics proposes. This does not mean the specificity of the visual is irrelevant in

¹¹ For an analysis of these correspondences and representations see Jacobs and Rodgers, "Par-delà l'ancien et le moderne: l'intertextualité visuelle et musicale de Césarée" *Les Lectures de Marguerite Duras*. A visual element such as the Egyptian obelisk certainly refers us to the stage of Racine's *Bérénice*, that is, the Roman Empire, where obelisks were popular, and one was even erected in the city of Caesarea two centuries after Titus and Bérénice's time.

the film, only that its import has to do with the gap opened by its obvious temporal discordance to the content of the verbal flux.

Monuments in a city have, in fact, a function of puncturing a smooth continuum of actuality from which the past has faded; the purpose of their appearance in this film is exactly to underscore a gap. For, noticing this function requires an irregular way of inhabiting the city, for instance, as a tourist or wanderer would. Habit turns monuments into an unnoticed background in the everyday routine, but beyond its history lesson, a monument reveals a strange, sometimes uncanny dimension of the space that shelters us, and it short-circuits the links between perception and comprehension of these immediate surroundings. The close-ups of indecipherable Egyptian hieroglyphs on the obelisk convey this most poignantly in the film. Once the gap between vision and comprehension becomes noticeable, the viewer will want to peek into it, so to speak, which as my reading of Racine's *Bérénice* will show carries a risk. And facing the gap, what is there to see? Aphoristically, Duras' voice in the film proclaims: "*Il n'y a plus rien à voir. Que le tout.*" '*There is nothing more to see. But the whole.*' Yet this "whole" is more of a hole.

A black screen and a violin's brief ritornello rising in minimal variations only to fall back to very low grounding note begin the film. After thirty seconds the screen brusquely opens with a close-up of Maillol's 1937 sculpture *Montagne (Mountain)*, surrounded by the Tuileries gardens in Paris, along which a few people pass in the background once in a while. The camera sweeps from right to left across this bronze mass shaped as a female seated body reclining on one hand and bending one leg up to form a triangular figure that indeed could be that of a mountain—or a wave, which is what the musical structure describes with its repetitive rising and falling notes within the limits of an octave.



Figure 12. Marguerite Duras, Still from *Césarée* (Maillol, *Montagne*, 1937) Benoît Jacob, 1979. FRAC Lorraine: <http://collection.fraclorraine.org/collection/print/169?lang=fr>

While the camera sweeps over this sculpture, Marguerite Duras' voice begins to recite her text over the music. The spectator might recognize Paris; however, its non-correspondence to the place verbally referred to is immediately striking. Moreover, one is removed from the Parisian everyday reality by the hazy white light and the absence of city sounds, replaced by this hypnotic violin tune and Duras' quiet, broken phrases in this contemplation of a body made of bronze, instead of human flesh and bones, and looking eyes (far more common in a film). Traits of the ordinary downtown Paris life (buses, cars, passersby, pigeons, the façades of the Louvre) do appear on the screen, and despite the lack of depth we are attracted to them for their contrast to the motionless sculpture. This background's independence from the camera's focus conveys to the viewer a sense of the city's ongoing temporality as unavailable, and thus underscores the insurmountable distance between it and one as viewer.

All these effects impose, of course, a particular state of perception on the spectator. The film plays on the fact that, like the sculpture, one is physically motionless except for the eyes, scanning the screen under the screen's time-space constraints. The film's disparities between sound and moving image are presented to a spectator who can perceive but not assemble the

multiple stimuli as they occur.¹² Displaced in this way from immediate assimilation of the ordinary reality the screen offers to the eye, the spectator is forced to slow down, coming closer to the role of a reader before a text. But reading is obviously not the same when the surface under one's eye is not inert; the flow of information keeps coming and going, forcing one to let images, sounds, and words disappear so as to continue receiving whatever next occupies the screen, and try to produce its meaningful link to what is no longer there.¹³ Knowing well that film spectatorship implies this dynamic, Duras sets its sensorial effects to work with the problem of thinking love.

By disturbing the synthesis of stimuli that grounds an individual's perception through its discordances, the film calls into question the viewer's independence from what it perceives. Cinema implies a spectator who is moved (at once in a sensorial, cognitive, and affective way) by what it perceives and whose reaction constructs meaning in return, so viewing implies assembling the elements that will yield a coherent image. But because this film upsets the efforts of coherence, the process of reading is interrogated and reinvented. Where mainstream cinema would indulge a spectator's inclination to make sense of what he or she is presented with, *Césarée* produces the feeling of missing whatever gives this tour around Paris its meaning. One of the difficulties with this film is to know whose point of view the camera discloses. If the speaking voice were in the first person, one would assume a character, even without its visual

¹² Duras' disarticulating strategy has been discussed through *India Song* and *Son nom de Venise à Calcutta déserte*; two films sharing a dialogue that runs along the whole film between two voices, commenting on some love tragedies at the French embassy in Calcutta. The first film displays human figures playing as the characters in question, but they never speak; their intervention is visual and kinesthetic. What they communicate to the viewer passes thus through these two channels, which are also their mode of relation to one another. See Duras' interview on this film by Dominique Noguez in *La couleur des mots* 61-101.

¹³ "[T]he human eye perceives the individual frames as continuous motion, due to a still-baffling phenomenon scientists first called "persistence of vision" and tend now to call "persistent afterimages." The cinema, then, arises truly from an interface: a technology of continuously moving still images and a process of perception on the part of the human spectator which readies him or her to receive this continuity as motion itself." 4 Villarejo, *Film Studies. The Basics*. NY: Routledge, 2007

appearance on the screen, but the voice is impersonal and designates someone else, who is missing from the screen and even indicated as an absence through the sculptures of female bodies. In between the impersonal voice that knows the story it tells at a distance, and the screen that does not provide the referent of the vocal discourse, the spectator slips out of the privileged position where it feels aware of or at least well equipped to follow the situation. However, the slippage does not merely lead one to an easily appropriable passivity with prêt-à-porter emotions either. The spectator enters a process correlative to the one endured by Bérénice, the figure of the *amoureuse*, so let us briefly turn to Racine and see what she is like.

Bérénice betrayed her people and kingdom to go to Rome, following the man who destroyed and oppressed them; in doing so she renounced the power she held as queen of Palestine. Here Titus tells of her inactive life in Rome to his confidant Paulin:

Je l'aimais, je lui plus. Depuis cette journée
(Dois-je dire funeste, hélas! Ou fortunée ?),
Sans avoir en aimant d'objet que son amour,
Etrangère dans Rome, inconnue à la cour,
Elle passe ses jours, Paulin, sans rien prétendre,
Que quelque heure à me voir, et le reste à m'attendre. (531-6)

I loved her and was loved. And since that day
(Was it ill-starred alas! or fortunate?)
With no aim in her love than love itself,
A foreigner in Rome, unknown at court,
She spends her days with no thought but to claim
Some hours with me, the rest to wait for me.

An unwise choice from a practical, economical viewpoint, love is the only function she keeps in Rome, and as Titus calls it, “her only object.” But what does it mean to have as sole object ones love? The phrase means at least two things: her love is her only purpose or objective, and also her only possession. She spends her day waiting to see him, but from the moment she met and liked him, her object—or aim—is strikingly not he, but rather, “son amour” ‘her love.’ In any

case, this love escapes an ordinary object economy, and seems ultimately incompatible with other ambitions and social ties. What kind of “object” is this love?

Titus’ speech betrays the limit of his insight into her love when he speaks these words; Marguerite Duras will take care to demonstrate where a further exploration of it leads. He is right to call her “étrangère dans Rome, inconnue à la cour,” it is above all her unreasonable choice and its underlying love experience that makes her so alien to Rome and even to Titus, in fact. As Titus can see, Bérénice’s cultivation of love implies her risking her reputation and giving up her homeland, people, and throne: all of her goods, which constituted her fortune under the Roman Empire (to which Palestine belonged at the time). Her possession of these objects –a matter of “avoir” – is literally her possibility of having a link to the Roman Empire. In French one would say “d’avoir à voir avec l’Empire,” instead of falling out of the good into the foreign state of “sans à voir (ni avec Rome ni avec la cour)” love puts her in. Compare her situation in this love relationship to Titus’: He is suffering because he has to renounce the woman he loves in order to keep his reputation as the new emperor. From the outset of their relationship he has enjoyed her company in Rome, his home, with the certainty that someday he will become emperor. It seems that all along he had avoided thinking about how incompatible having the throne and having her would be, given that the Roman law had always been against foreign rulers and especially monarchs, which means he cannot make her empress. The fact that it never occurs to him to sacrifice the diadem for her love makes it clear that—unlike Bérénice—he cannot devote his life to love alone, without the goods of power and his people’s admiration and respect, which is also to say outside what is legally and morally good. Bérénice gave him pleasure, but if he can let go of her to be the emperor, then for him she was a replaceable object of pleasure after all.¹⁴

¹⁴ Mitchell Greenberg analyzes the plot of *Bérénice* as more than an expression of the political situation in late seventeenth century France, during the reign of Louis XIV, by incorporating the sexual dimension to see “a

It sounds like a most unfair arrangement between the lovers, but the problem here, namely for Duras, has nothing to do with “making things even” in Bérénice’s afterlife in a film (and this sets Duras apart from a feminism that seeks reversal of power roles). Bérénice’s possession of no object but love entails here a particularly strange situation if we think of its effects upon the kind of relation she can maintain thereafter with the world; from the moment she makes Titus her lover, she has to do only with love, which is also to say that, in addition to getting an hour of Titus now and then, she has nothing to see anymore: “N’avoir plus rien à voir que (avec) l’amour.” What if this object of hers had the appearance not of Titus, but instead, of what he calls “le reste” ‘the rest,’ those dead hours when they are apart, of a “plus rien” or “nothing” left for her to see?

Duras thinks this is precisely the case; the problem of love, then, is not so much about Bérénice feeling loved and Titus offering her an image of her self as a lovable object. In other words, love is not about the illusion of “being dressed by the other’s image,”¹⁵ but rather about coming face to face with a “nothing,” that is, the “rien” Duras’ *Césarée* keeps repeating. Love’s field, then, is a kind of spacing opened up by “La douleur de leur séparation” (96) ‘the pain of their separation.’ This nothing-left-to-see is the image of love Duras engages with and wants to make visible; it is what makes her engage in such peculiar work with cinema, *and also the wordless center of her writing*, which is key to this love experience, as I will show further on.

refiguring of the myth of Oedipus that is contemporaneously elaborating and solidifying the hegemonic discourse of Western/Christian difference” (143). While drawing very different consequences (focusing on narcissism and maternal femininity), Greenberg’s reading of desire and sexual difference in *Bérénice* takes into account the reversal of typical Western gender roles operative in the gaze, where Bérénice “looks” and even produces an image of Titus (as emperor/symbolic/public figure), a reversal that, as this chapter shows, inspires Duras’ experiment with the spectator in *Césarée*.

¹⁵ Lacan pays homage to Duras’ *Lol V. Stein* by examining some of his formulas in the light of her novel. One of these is on love, “ce qui est arrivé à Lol, et qui révèle ce qu’il en est de l’amour ; soit de cette image, image de soi dont l’autre vous revêt et qui vous habille, et qui vous laisse quand vous en êtes dérobée, quoi être sous ? ... Ce qui vous reste alors, c’est ce qu’on disait de vous quand vous étiez petite, que vous n’étiez jamais bien là.” *Marguerite Duras*. Paris: Albatros, 1975. 95-96. For Duras, the starting point to think about love is only this moment of withdrawal or “undressing.”

Like Bérénice, *Césarée*'s spectator is exiled from a "functional" position. Unlike the vast majority of films, in this disjointed piece the screen does not provide an object for one to latch onto by the means of identification.¹⁶ The camera targets a sculpture, and obviously a sculpture is an object, moreover through this film one gets to see several of them, but the object is missing, first insofar as the disjointed visual, verbal, and aural elements to which the film exposes the spectator upset perception's synthetic efforts and do not allow one to cognitively construct an object, a necessary action for the spectator to be able to say *what* he/she sees. Also, as we know, Bérénice was not simply an object of cognitive perception, but rather an (replaceable) object of desire for Titus. If one were to suppose that the sculptures of female bodies on the screen represent Bérénice, in the way that an actress plays a character, the inert quality of these bronze and marble images—paradoxical in the media concerned with the moving image—disappoints any attempt to see her from Titus' perspective, that is, as an object of pleasure, which is Duras' point. The way in which Duras proposes to "see Bérénice" is closer to—but not exactly—how she, the loved object, is "seen" by Antiochus, the third, and losing party in the love triangle of Racine's play (although, as the play's last line showed earlier, in the end all three lose their loved one and each go separate ways). Since he cannot have her and since she practically leaves the world behind when she falls in love, Antiochus "sees" her in correspondence with Duras' script, as impossible or as an empty landscape:

Dans l'orient desert quel devint mon ennui!
 Je demeurai longtemps errant dans Césarée
 Lieux charmants où mon coeur vous avait adorée. (234-6)

¹⁶ The cinematic apparatus places the spectator in a position of identification, first of all through the projector functioning as the eye; second, a narcissistic identification with the image is also set to work through the codes that prompt certain constructions of meaning, which imply certain ways of looking at "the woman." Through the prominently Oedipal narratives, dominant cinema has traditionally assumed the spectator to be male and heterosexual, and woman in the film is fetichized by making the female body and object of beauty and perfection. At stake are both desire and fear of castration, which fetichization disavows. See Mayne's *Cinema and Spectatorship*. Identification is what Bérénice becomes unhinged from when, as I have explained, her love is no longer about identifying as the object of Titus' pleasure.

The East was one vast desert when I pined.
I wandered long in Caesarea where,
Drinking enchantment, I had worshipped you.

As a viewer of Duras' *Césarée*, following the camera's wanderings in Paris, one is invited to see her as distant, unreachable:



Figure 13. Marguerite Duras, Still from *Cesarée* (Louis-Denis Caillouette, *Bordeaux*, 1835-38). ©Jean Mascolo.
<<http://www.worldscinema.com/2010/07/marguerite-duras-cesaree-1978.html>>

This image belongs to an intermittent sequence that alternates with the ones showing Maillol sculptures on the garden. In contrast with the sweeping motions scanning the bronze bodies, here the camera is still, looking up from various low-angle perspectives, at scaffolds surrounding a monumental white sculpture of a seated woman, as inhuman as the Maillols. At the Place de la Concorde in Paris she actually represents the cities of Nantes and Bordeaux,¹⁷ in concordance with Duras' renaming of Bérénice with the name of her city, portrayed as deserted and in ruins.

The scaffold's metal pipes and a blue, rectangular piece of fabric over part of the sculpture's side striate the screen, turning it into a complicated grid, tilted by the camera's angle.

¹⁷ These shots were created by combining Nantes and Bordeaux, two of the eight sculptures that sit at each of the Place de la Concorde's corners, in restoration when Duras shot the film. Their author is Louis-Denis Caillouette (1790-1868).

This composition disrupts a seamless sense of image that reinforces a way of seeing where the woman is constructed as object of pleasure. Through the scaffolds, she becomes at once fragmented and unavailable. If the relationship between the viewer and this female statue seated at her throne behind a metal grid has to do with the love of Bérénice, the composition of this image thwarts the attempt to admire the woman's beauty, and tells the viewer that love between two has nothing to do with overcoming the distance that separates them.

As mentioned, Duras turns to a visual artifact such as cinema to ensure a tight interlacing of love and seeing, with which she puts forth a different function and dynamic of desire, so on these crucial aspects her work relates to a medieval literary phenomenon called courtly love. Jacques Lacan noted how this writing treated language in a non-representative manner, and how this style was intrinsic to the particular way in which desire operated. Instead of making a common image of the beloved woman, the troubadours, addressing an unreachable, prohibited Lady, wrote by spinning a web of signifiers such that "the absence at its heart is included" (MacCannell 28).¹⁸ The Lady, whom the troubadour does not and never will possess, is the feminine "object," or as Lacan prefers to call her in distinguishing her from ordinary objects of pleasure, the "Thing" of his poem. The network of signifiers that in courtly love—as in *Césarée*—turn upon a center impossible to represent, situate desire beyond a realm where objects would lie at the subject's reach.¹⁹

The encounter between the lover's and the Lady's eyes is indispensable, without leading to love's consummation. In the mind of the Provençal troubadours, the heart of the Lady or

¹⁸ For examples of this strategy in these poems, see Kay, Sarah. "Desire and Subjectivity" *The Troubadours: An Introduction*. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay, eds. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U. Press, 1999), 217-18.

¹⁹ See Lacan, Jacques. *L'éthique de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 127, 133. Lacan also importantly distinguishes idealization—where identification to the object is at stake—from sublimation, which is "tout autre chose." 132. Lacan explored his own statements regarding love, a fundamental question for the subject of desire and language, in relation to Duras' novels early as the 1960s, and this relation remains relevant, in that both Lacan and Duras set out to interrogate in language a tragic dimension of love, for the way in which it reveals that sexuality makes the union of the one and the other impossible.

“feminine object” emanates *joi*, a substance that is communicated when her eyes meet the man’s; he becomes enamored when the substance, like an elixir, descends into his heart. An affect the lover experiences but also a characteristic of the Lady linked to her dazzling beauty, *joi* engages man and Lady in this subtly physical way, without any carnal pleasure.²⁰ Durasian spectators—for it is necessary to go under her spell in order to see and read *Césarée* according to its own terms—enter into this visual tension with the screen, where Bérénice’s absence reveals a void. As there are no other characters or actions, the spectator becomes directly and solely concerned with this experience. As immanent force, love emerges between the eye and the screen and sustains itself alone, without an end (which love’s consummation would bring), as on a space cleared by a crossing of gazes.

From beginning to end Duras stresses the spatiotemporal separation between the viewer and what appears to his/her eye and ear, and this is the function of the very last phrases one hears her voice speak in *Césarée*: “Il fait à Paris un mauvais été. Froid, de la brume” (102). ‘It is a bad summer in Paris. Cold, misty.’ These phrases strike one at the end of the film because all along one has been hearing fragments of a story corresponding to Caesarea, a place that is clearly not Paris, and while it is easy to recognize the latter on the screen, it is as if all along the voice had been either denying the visual dimension of the film, or blind to it. If blindness is the case, it can be explained by a voice’s not having eyes, which means that the two organs cannot be unified to reconstruct a single perspective, an interpretation the spectator’s own experience of disjointed visual and aural channels supports. And it could also be a blindness resulting from the speaker’s state of mind; the spectator’s access to it is in the content of the voice’s speech, and in the tone and rhythm of her voice. Since she only speaks of Caesarea and of a story, and since with her

²⁰ Cf. Nelli, René *L’érotisme des troubadours classiques* (Paris: Bibliothèque Méridionale, 1963), 164-74.

entranced voice accompanied by the hypnotic violin ritornello it repeats the city's name almost as if it were a mantra, there is also reason to believe she cannot see anything except what she speaks of.²¹ Yet in these final, surprising remarks the voice suggests that she is aware of the weather conditions and the visual aspect of Paris, as they match the spectator's impressions, although the latter, constrained to visual and aural reception, obviously does not have access to the temperature. Through this irony and speaking lines that one would read in a postcard (especially when paired with traditional, touristic images of central Paris), the voice gives a final reminder, before the cinematic illusion ends, of the inaccessible status of the image and the distance that inevitably separates the viewer from it, as the Lady is prohibited for the courtly lover. The effect of such a twist is double: first, against the mainstream, the viewer of Duras' film is prevented from falling into the illusion of presence to what s/he sees. And second, Duras situates his/her experience at a borderline between ordinary reality and the unrepresentable, since without ceasing to see the world's actual contents (downtown Paris), s/he encounters them as disjointed parts that expose a void. "Il n'y a plus rien à voir que le tout."

In addition to establishing this dynamic of desire, *Césarée*'s disruption of the viewer's traditionally synthetic and representational operations discourages a narrative account of what is going on through this sequence of images. The sequences of shots deliberately make their discontinuity palpable; before the viewer can start to narratively reconstruct a shot, for instance the shot that slowly scans the Maillol sculptures, s/he is pulled out of the scene by an abrupt cut, followed by either a black screen, or another shot whose stylistic differences are immediately noticeable (still, low-angle camera and jump cuts for the Caillouette sculpture behind scaffolds; traveling, continuous shots for the Maillols). One is thus not lodged by the film's optical

²¹ In parallel Antiochus bemoans, as he announces his departure to Bérénice, her "blindness" to him and anything other than Titus: "Que vous dirai-je enfin? Je fuis des yeux distraits/ qui me voyant toujours, ne me voyaient jamais" (I, IV).

component;²² instead, if one finds a ground it is as rhythm, articulated by the shifting shots, the camera sweeps, the voice's slowness, and the violin's wavelike rises and falls on the scale with its subtle variations in speed and intensity. If the ground is rhythm, then it is not fixed; Duras takes advantage of this condition.

Maillol's female bodies figure Bérénice in this film only to the extent that she has become an inflection of the landscape, or one should say, since the film thrives on the unfixed, fluid features of music, voice, and camera shots, of the seascape. It is perhaps why Maillol gave those female statues featured in *Césarée* titles such as *Montaigne*, *Rivière*, or *Air*.

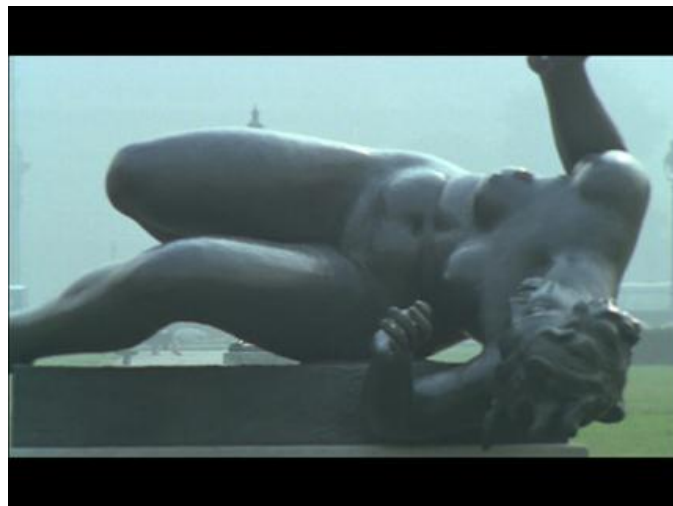


Figure 14. Marguerite Duras, Still from *Césarée* (Maillol, *Rivière*, c.1938-1943) Benoît Jacob, 1979.

Whenever the camera shows the Tuileries gardens it travels, even while focusing on these sculptures, giving the viewer—fastened to the tempo of the camera's scanning motion—the feeling of floating adrift because the destiny of the camera's own course is inscrutable, or rather, because its direction and end are non-existent since there is no narrative. One sees the sculptures

²² In his Seminar XI, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Lacan reflects upon the scopic drive through painting and the distinction between the eye and the gaze. He submits that the painting offers “something for the eye to feed on, but [he] invites the the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his (sic) gaze as one lays down one's weapons. This is the pacifying, Apollonian effect of painting” (101). Duras' film instead dislodges the eye and turns the spectator to rhythm, a more destabilizing, Dionysian effect. In “La destruction la parole” Duras discusses the need to disarticulate the given point of view the camera usually introduces to guide the viewer, in favor of a more creative spectatorship.

in the garden as from a ship adrift, then, perhaps in the way Bérénice would have seen after her ship sails away from Rome on the Mediterranean Sea, and it is not by coincidence that the shots Duras used to make this short film were remainders of another film on love called *Le Navire Night*, “The Ship ‘Night.’”²³ Challenging common sense, which tells us a city’s physical state is solid, the film composes liquid shots of Paris.

A few sequences into the film, taking one back and forth between Maillols and Caillouettes, one arrives at a scene from the actual viewpoint of the river Seine flowing from right to left, in the same direction as most of the Tuileries shots. Instead of looking up at the city from this angle (in the way tourists on a bateau-mouche would) the gaze rests on the water surface where buildings on the Parisian Right Bank are reflected. Through the traveling shot, the place passing before one’s eyes already conveys impermanence; seeing this place on a liquid, wavering surface exacerbates the sensation of evanescence. This example of cinema’s visual singularity as a writing medium expresses the logic that led Duras from novels to cinema in a moment when her writing reached a limit with words, while a space for desire’s emergence remained necessary. Within the duration established by the traveling shot, the reflections of buildings on the rippling water scanned by the flowing camera’s gaze turn the city into liquid; this specific construction of the non-object is an instance of a poetic, optical transmission of an objectless, speechless moment in its specific temporality.

Through these techniques Duras also sets the permanence of a monumental city such as Paris against the transience of reality that filmic images project onto the screen surface. Liquid for Duras, as we know, is a destructive force. What she seeks with this is to produce a disjointed point of view for the viewer to step out of a comfortable inhabitation of the historical fabric,

²³ This is also the case with the shots composing *Les mains négatives*, another short film released simultaneously. *Césaire* features day scenes, whereas in *Les mains* the scenes were shot before dawn. See *La couleur des mots* 169-70.

where the latter can endorse the constituted subjects' present and remain unthought. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the condition for becoming sensitive to the puncturing of a smooth continuum of actuality is an irregular way of inhabiting the city. More than a tourist, however touristic these sites are, one's view is that of a Rambler or even a shipwrecked wanderer.

Another main strategy this film explores to tear the illusion of ongoing time as a smooth continuum is montage. Within the sequences showing the statue behind four walls of scaffolding, the still shots switch between its planes through jump cuts, in a tempo dramatically different from the one used for the Tuileries sequences I have described. Neither technique is more realistic than the other. Instead of offering an ordinary experience of duration, the cuts' subtle violence suggest an irregular state of consciousness giving way to an uncanny, discontinuous view of what would otherwise be an unremarkable statue under restoration, the process by which the statue can reappear as unharmed by time and exposure to its environment. The scaffolds themselves, striating the screen, participate in this tearing of continuity. While restoration serves to preserve monuments from decay, to conceal time as a ravaging force from one's eye, the scaffolds on the screen expose an artifice whose interest is to reassure inhabitants that the city is alive, has had a meaningful unfolding that upholds the present, shelters its inhabitants, and also in this case, since these sculptures represent other French cities, unites Paris to other symbolic components of France.



Figure 15. Marguerite Duras, from *Césarée* (Caillouette, *Nantes*). Benoît Jacob, 1979. FRAC Lorraine: <http://collection.fraclorraine.org/collection/print/169?lang=fr>

Among the sequences of the barred Caillouette statue is one that focuses on its face. At this point in the film the reciting voice, the violin, and the image on the screen seem to come together exceptionally and reach a peak of intensity. To announce this point of convergence the voice describing the Caesarian seascape utters the word ‘bleues’ just as we see the blue sky; only a few seconds later the phrase one hears her say “Tout détruit. Tout a été détruit” ‘All destroyed. Everything was destroyed’ amidst a noticeable increase in the violin’s volume, speed and pitch, which at other moments in the film recede to an almost underlying murmur. At the same time the camera shifts to a close-up of the statue’s face shows its rough, damaged surface. Beholding against the blue skies—or seas—this statue’s broken face, whose empty, blank eyes look steadily ahead with the city at its feet, one gains visibility of the city as this face reflects it: eroded, clashing with the glorious air the monumental statues, seated at the Place de la Concorde with their bay diadems, were supposed to suggest.

Earlier I advanced that the dominant perspective on the feminine object of desire cinema so frequently elicits is not what this particular film calls for, that seeing it requires a different approach toward the feminine object. Cinema generally exploits Western civilization’s “love” for woman,²⁴ and while its conditions of distance between the spectator and woman as the object of desire on the screen promote her shift from pleasurable object to a status where she is unreachable or prohibited (“a star”), idealization is the mainstream dynamic in play. And the statue’s face examined above does not, of course, offer an idealized image of glory or beauty; in its opacity and traits of destruction it does not offer one a pleasing reflection of oneself, and this

²⁴ Feminist film theorists have examined and developed this topic, drawing on psychoanalytic theory since Laura Mulvey’s famous “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in 1975, where woman’s castration marks the point of departure for civilization’s phallocentrism, which cinema reproduces.

forces one to see her as strictly impossible to appropriate, as Other. But the point of view presented in Racine's play, of Antiochus as troubadour not only admiring Bérénice having to confront her absence in the desert lands of Caesarea, as a form of the Lady's uncanniness, is also not the one this film ultimately seeks. As explained with a line by Titus, explaining Bérénice's dispossession of all objects *except* for her love led to the interrogation of this strange object that is not an object. The double genitive in "love *of* the feminine object" includes not only the (masculine) subject's love of the object, but also the object as subject (to love), making it possible to conceive of this "object" or "Lady" as having a strange, unknown love of her own, her *joi*, which Lacan called the *jouissance* of the Other.²⁵ So how can the viewer take this feminine standpoint? To put it in a courtly love image, when the lover's eyes drink *joi* from the Lady's gaze and he lets it sink into his heart a transformation in his own vision and desire can occur. And Duras shows how this transformation, this *liquid* experience of *joi* or feminine *jouissance*, has to do with how language and space are inhabited. Bérénice comes to the state of dispossession in which she only relates to her love by letting go of the ties that linked her to a social regime. Insofar as language grounds this social order and the subjects of desire, cutting the fundamental link that binds her to civilization entails a different engagement with language, whose purpose is not to reinforce meaning.

Lacan's presentation of courtly love has highlighted a poetic articulation of signifiers around a void that situates feminine *jouissance*, which gives insight to what Duras is undertaking in *Césarée* through Bérénice as impossible to represent. With regard to the work of writing in Duras, the relevance of Bérénice in her capacity as *femme amoureuse*, that is, in her peculiar relation to love, still needs to be explored. Deleuze and Guattari shed light on the *femme*

²⁵ The femininity of the *jouissance* of the Other refers to a logic of the desiring subject as constituted by language and sexual difference, where for Lacan "the Other is the other sex." "L'Autre, dans mon langage, cela ne peut donc être que l'Autre sexe." See *Encore*, 52.

amoureuse as vantage point and also focus on a concept of space that relates to a feminine experience of desire and language, all threads that Duras brings together. The reading of courtly love that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari undertake after Lacan praises this poetry's uncommon knowledge about desire, about a joy of desiring without end (like a "shipwrecked wanderer"), where "ce qui compte seulement, c'est que le plaisir soit le flux du désir lui même" (MP 194) 'all that counts is for pleasure to be the flow of desire itself' (*A Thousand Plateaux* 156). The *savoir* of *joi* or *gai savoir*²⁶ liberates flows of desire and draws a field of creation. They name this spatially conceived field *plane of consistency* or *immanence*, and while not exclusive to the thirteenth-century courtly love phenomenon, it is accessed on the condition of embracing femininity, or in their own words, of "becoming-woman."²⁷ As this chapter has stressed so far, in the Durasian gap or "irrational cut" as Deleuze identifies it in his work on cinema, there is a unique way of sustaining the field of creation or writing, where place and space, as well as the construction of a liquid image or what I called a "fluid non-object," have an essential relation to a specific, feminine experience of love.²⁸

²⁶ In 1323 the troubadour poets in Toulouse founded an institution devoted to their knowledge of love, which they called the "Consistori del Gay Saber," organizing yearly poetry competitions. Lacan, who as we know read the courtly love poets, at a certain point in *Télévision* speaks of the "gai sçavoir," where the change of spelling conveys the *ça* level of this joyful knowledge (40), as site of the unconscious.

²⁷ "(peut-être le devenir-femme possède sur tous les autres un pouvoir introductif particulier...)" MP. 304 "...tous les devenirs commencent et passent par le devenir-femme. C'est la clef des autres devenirs." 340.

²⁸ Deleuze analyzes Marguerite Duras' films at the end of *L'image-temps*, the second part of his piece on cinema. He construes the gap between sound and image in Duras as releasing two images, a sonorous and a visual one "avec une faille, une interstice, une coupure irrationnelle entre les deux" (327) 'a crevice, an interstice, an irrational cut in between the two.' Deleuze recognizes a shift in Duras' cinema work, from the house, as privileged space to stage the idea that "les passions 'habitent' les femmes" (336) 'passions 'inhabit' women,' to the beach-sea, for "une histoire qui n'a plus de lieu (image sonore) pour des lieux qui n'ont plus d'histoire (image visuelle)" (336). He takes the latter formulation from a close analysis of Duras' oeuvre by Youssef Ishagpour (n.60, 335). Deleuze does not show the correspondence between "inhabited women" and the "seaside" it later becomes, which his own theory with Guattari on becoming-woman enables. He finds a few other film directors who experiment with the disruption of the audio-visual image to release two images and the gap between them, but when he asks himself what makes Duras' oeuvre distinctive he finds two differences: first, "l'acte de parole à atteindre est l'amour entier ou le désir absolu. C'est lui qui peut être silence, ou chant, ou cri..." 'the sought speech act is love in its entirety or absolute desire. It can be silence, song, or scream...'; and second "une liquidité qui marque de plus en plus l'image visuelle" (337) 'a

While “plane of consistency” suggests a flat surface where particles hold together, for Deleuze and Guattari it stands outside the order of representation, disrupting stable and productive entities, organisms, or territories. An image of unity and wholeness, an arrangement into distinct parcels or strata, a meaningful, teleological orientation, and transcendence are some of the usable territory’s major underpinnings.²⁹ They are what love must break out of, giving way to the plane of immanence or consistency, held together by something not representable, in the way the Lady is the empty center of the troubadour’s poetic plane, where words do not commonly signify, but instead articulate something beyond signification. The order of becoming opposes being; its potential to compose a plane of immanence is realized if deterritorialization is able to reach its maximum degree without abolishing the possibility of creation. If becoming-woman is the necessary starting point of a movement toward immanence, the point of access outside the ontological regime correlative to the plane of organization, then “destruction”—the destruction Duras insists upon here and elsewhere, whose exemplary figure is the sea eroding the land—is somehow intrinsic to this feminine move beyond signification. Duras, for whom the creative space of writing requires this overflow, explores its connection to love and the limits of language; and so the work of writing here is capable of taking the reader through its channels.

*La mer a gagnée sur la terre de Césarée
 Les rues de Césarée étaient étroites, obscures.
 Leur fraîcheur donnait sur le soleil des places
 l'arrivée des navires
 et la poussière des troupeaux. (99)*

*The sea engulfed the ground of Caesarea
 The streets of Caesarea were narrow, dark*

liquidity that increasingly determines the visual image.’ These images’ power as *lines of flight* toward the *plane of immanence* also remains implicit in his analysis.

²⁹ The authors oppose “consistence, composition, and immanence” to the “plane of organization,” determined by a logic of beginning and end and concerned with the development of forms and the formation of a subject or substance. Transcendence here means that “what is composed” and “the composer” are not at the same level, not produced simultaneously or not immanent to one another. See “Souvenirs d’un planificateur” (*Mille Plateaux*, 325).

*Their coolness abutted the sunny plazas
The arrival of the ships
And the dust of the herds.*

Perhaps the feminine declination in the name “Césarée” and in “la mer” ‘the sea’ suggests something feminine about the devastation as such. Among the many examples Deleuze and Guattari propose in *Mille Plateaux* in order to examine the regime of signs that emerges by breaking loose from the signifying regime where meaning dominates,³⁰ is a date: “587 av. J.-C. - 70 ap.” Although included in the title for this entire plateau, it is better known as “Sur quelques régimes des signes” (“On Some Regimes of Signs”). The date is discussed as they explain the conditions of a regime of signs they define as “post-signifying,” subjective, or passional:

On ne peut pas négliger ici l'événement le plus fondamental ou le plus extensive de l'histoire du peuple juif: la destruction du temple, qui se fait en deux temps (587 av. J.-C. - 70 ap.). (*MP* 153)

We cannot overlook the most fundamental or extensive event in the history of the Jewish people: the destruction of the Temple, in two stages (587 B.C. and A.D. 70). (*A Thousand Plateaux* 135)

As we know, in the second of this event's moments the executor of the Temple's destruction is none other than Titus, Bérénice's lover. In fact, the Jewish riot that results in Rome's destruction of the temple of Jerusalem under Titus' command is the stage where his affair with Bérénice starts. For Deleuze and Guattari, the “destruction” defining the Jewish Temple account initiates the exile or “deterritorialization” that could lead to a break from regimes of signs altogether. However, nostalgia for the signifying regime creeps in at every attempt to end the Diaspora (by reconstructing a signifying nucleus through a solid temple and the reestablishment of an imperial

³⁰ Other biblical examples include Caïn turning away from God, Jonas who betrays God, and Jesus betrayed by God. In other areas Oedipus, the Cartesian Cogito, nineteenth century psychiatry in positing the “subjective delirium,” the anorexic, and tragic lovers such as Tristan and Isolde are listed under this subjective or passional regime.

society). Still, the event is of paramount importance to de-center meaning from the language apparatus³¹ and thus envisage the new, for which no meaning is pre-established.

Deleuze and Guattari overlook Bérénice's action regarding the destruction of the Temple as event of deterritorialization. Had they considered her position, they would have admitted that, whether or not some aspects of this moment retain the ideal of an organized, sedentary kingdom, Bérénice already drew the full line of flight to a plane of immanence, creation, the radically new not anchored in an idealized past. It was Duras who noticed this potential in Bérénice's literary expression in Racine's play, Duras' ear that highlighted Racine's a-signifying power: "le vent du divin souffle dans les grandes forêts de Racine... C'est Racine mais pas détaillé, pas lu, pensé. C'est la musique de Racine. C'est la musique qui parle" (*La vie matérielle*, 92-3). Racine as event of this becoming-music introduces a literary line of deterritorialization, a line that allows Duras' work with the name "Césarée" to pierce the textual field and become an encrypted mantra, uttered again and again throughout the film. "Césarée" is one of the Durasian "mots-trou" 'hole-words': "un mot-trou, creusé en son centre d'un trou... on n'aurait pas pu le dire mais on aurait pu le faire résonner. Immense, sans fin, un gong vide..." (*Lol V. Stein* 54) 'an absence-word, a hole-word, whose center would have been hollowed out into a hole... It would have been impossible to utter it, but it would have been made to reverberate. Enormous, endless, an empty gong...' (*The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, 38).³²

³¹ In the authors' view it may go as far as to de-center a linguistic paradigm to the benefit of a pragmatics with a broader, yet more specific scope than semiotics as based on the universality of language and a set of founding generalizations. (See *MP* 140-141) This radical stance (a point of tension with psychoanalysis) is a productive alternative to philosophical discourse on art, where the verbal is generally the model to analyze other art forms. However, Duras' writing explores language's potential as a singularity and always infiltrated by the non-verbal.

³² Serge André presents this concept from Duras' novel to exemplify feminine castration in psychoanalysis. See his *Que veut-une femme?* (186-7)

The surface of “Cleopatra’s Needle,”³³ the obelisk at the Place de la Concorde whose Egyptian hieroglyphs’ meaning is unavailable to most readers, is scanned intently in *Césarée*. Here is the other exceptional moment at which Duras’ voice engages with the vision, by speaking of reading an ancient past whose reality has disappeared, leaving cryptic remainders: “on lit encore la pensée des gens de Césarée” ‘one still reads the thought of the people of Caesarea.’ On the surface of Cleopatra’s Needle one still reads the thought of the even more ancient people of Egypt in the thirteenth century BCE. Except one cannot hope to translate their thoughts carved onto the surface. As the viewing gesture of a feminine love experience, the traveling shot preserves the illegible drawings of an ancient writing, in the way that Duras keeps only unthought, musical Racine. If the film transmits a memory “rien que la mémoire de l’histoire...” ‘nothing but the memory of the story...’, then its remembering is beyond signification as well. This moment in the film stresses the illegibility of the traces this and every signifier in the film uniquely constitute, since they only lead to a void rather than to profitable meaning. And yet these traces scanned, viewed, retraced, and spoken time and again like the violin’s ritornello, insist upon a need for, or perhaps a certain feminine ‘joi’ in the useless repetitions.

II. L’amour. *Anagrams*

This chapter’s reading of *Césarée* has focused on the link of love and seeing that Duras’ work seeks to transmit as feminine by transforming the dynamics between spectator and film; the chapter has submitted that the various strategies examined here are directed at such a

³³ Obelisks were popular during the Roman Empire; the city Caesarea had one, for example, and it is preserved to this day. Through its name, the Paris obelisk alludes to Cleopatra and Marc Anthony’s love tragedy, which bears relation to *Bérénice*, in the historical context (Marc Anthony is Titus’ predecessor), the foreign woman as a threat to the Roman power structure, the maritime voyage/exile, etc. The story of the popularly named “aiguille de Cléopâtre” in Paris itself parallels the tragic separation of lovers: in 1829 the government of Egypt had offered two twin obelisks from the Luxor Temple in Egypt, and the first was sent by sea in a ship that came into the city via the Seine. Due to transportation difficulties, its twin was left behind in Egypt (and was officially returned to Egypt by Mitterrand in the 1980s).

transformation. Turning to Racine's *Bérénice* has provided some keys to the specificity of love according to this feminine figure Duras imports and rethinks, rendering manifest a crucial, immanent connection between language's oblique, repetitive mode of operation and the love experience that it makes thinkable. Moreover, the chapter suggested a profound link between this Durasian treatment of language and the city's state of ruin described throughout the film, where "the sea engulfed the ground." Analogously, music and silences engulf words, as the non-object or liquid image overwrites the object. The film's insistent movements of retracing tracks of the past perform the gesture of reading a written text, which as a gesture of preserving memories complicates the image of destruction as the condition for a space of genuine creation, for writing and not the written. As the end of the previous section pointed out, the difference between an ordinary reading of the past and Duras' film lies in this gesture's being a reading that treats the text as unreadable. How is this peculiar reading style connected to the feminine perspective Duras wants the viewer to take? Its logic seems connected to the strategy of dismantling the cinematic image such that its spectator cannot operate by synthesizing them to retrieve meaning, and instead comes up against the void of an unbridgeable gap between sound and vision, all of which emphasizes the work of constructing enigmatic fragments and the spaces between them.

If these traits refer to the experience the *femme amoureuse* names, then their implications can offer insight to this position in its difference to the "I" Roland Barthes designated at the beginning of this chapter as the "pronoun of the amorous discourse and of the Imaginary" (see page 4). A memory procedure unable to decipher the meaning of the traces in question suggests an important break between the mind contemporary to the act of tracing and that trying to remember. In other words, it is not the same "I" in each of the two moments, so the production of this difference implies some kind of destruction or radical disappearance of the past "I" to whom

the traces were legible. This is what happens to Duras' character Lol V. Stein, a woman who permanently loses her 'self' at the end of a ball in a casino by the beach, where her fiancé leaves her for another woman in *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (*The ravishing of Lol Stein*), and whose practically plotless, cyclical afterlife *L'amour* presents. Disclosing anagrams and drawing palindromes on the ever-erased seashore, *L'amour* details the stakes of unreadable but insistently retraced tracks with regard to the feminine, liquid love experience examined up to this point.

On opening *L'amour*, the dejected personae who from its first pages appear outdoors, wandering aimlessly, elicit this first question: how does an empty, devastated territory at the seaside, only preserved as ruins and inhabited by somnambulists or amnesic ramblers as desolate as the landscape, become a perfect fit for the name Love?

Un homme.

Il est debout, il regarde: la plage, la mer. (...) La mer, la plage, il y a des flaques, des surfaces d'eau calme isolées.

Entre l'homme qui regarde et la mer, tout au bord de la mer, loin, quelqu'un marche. Un autre homme. (...)

A gauche, une femme aux yeux fermés. Assise.

(...)

Le triangle se ferme avec la femme aux yeux fermés. Elle est assise contre un mur qui délimite la plage vers sa fin, la ville.

(...) le triangle se déforme, se reforme, sans se briser jamais. (7-8)

A man.

He is standing, he is looking: the beach, the sea. (...) The sea, the beach, there are puddles, isolated surfaces of still water.

Between the man who looks and the sea, right at the seashore, far, someone walks. Another man. (...)

To the left, a woman with closed eyes. Seated.

(...)

The triangle closes with the woman whose eyes are closed. She sits against a wall that delimits the beach from its end, the city.

(...) the triangle deforms, reforms, without ever breaking.

As the personae appear, an empty space is repeatedly produced in *L'amour*'s first few lines: in the puddles, in the vacant area of the triangle the three personae form, in the halting sentences

and paragraphs without transitions. Three figures and some puddles of seawater dissolving the ground interrupt S. Thala's smooth, blank sands. A wall divides the city from this empty seaside here, but this separation will disappear once the woman leaning on it steps into the deserted city with the voyageur. Unlike the preceding novels of the trilogy this text belongs to (*Le ravisement de Lol V. Stein* and *Le viceconsul*) the personae here remain unnamed.³⁴ Initially, it is only each one's aspect, their physical and looking gestures, and their sex that distinguish them from one another: first "un homme qui regarde" (7) 'a man who is looking/who gazes,' who later becomes permanently designated as "le voyageur" (13), 'the voyageur,' since he arrives from elsewhere to S. Thala, but also "à cause de la lenteur de son pas, l'égarement de son regard" (13-14). 'because of the slowness of his pace, the erratic nature of his gaze.' He looks at "l'homme qui marche," 'the man who walks' (and who 'does not look:' "l'homme qui marche ne regarde pas"). Finally, "une femme aux yeux fermés. Assise." (8) 'a woman with her eyes closed. Sitting.'

Just like its scenery, events in *L'amour* are sparse; moreover, dialogues are broken, interrupted by vast silences just as paragraphs on the page are irregularly interrupted by wide blank spaces. The novel is driven forward by the narrator, who notes the movement of the sea hitting the shore and receding, light shifting between day and night or sounds and silence, and a set of aimless walks these three figures take in S. Thala until they get to its "heart." Here is an example:

Le jour baisse.

La mer, le ciel, occupent l'espace. Au loin, la mer est déjà oxydée par la lumière obscure, de même que le ciel.

³⁴ *L'amour* is the third text to appear in what Durasian scholarship calls the author's India Cycle. The explicit elements that allow for its connection to the previous two novels, and to the films that follow it, are, however, minimal. For one who has read the preceding texts in sequential order, the name "S. Thala," which designates the place where *L'amour* unfolds, is one Duras returns to. The repetition invites the reader to work through the novel with the reality of the previous ones in mind, but as the only proper name to ever appear, the clue only emphasizes the text's enigmatic quality.

Trois, ils sont trois dans la lumière obscure, le réseau de lenteur. (8-9)

The day fades.

The sea, the sky, occupy the space. In the distance, the sea is already rusty from the dark light, just as the sea.

Three, they are three in the dark light, the web of slowness.

Such elements give the novel a cinematic dimension; beyond merely betraying the author's taste for cinema, the force of non-verbal and a-teleological components (upsetting the usual narrative artifice) sustains writing at a level of sensation that is irreducible to meaning and purpose, and at a zero-degree of *spacing*, where writing sketches out a writing space.

L'amour thus situates the reader and its minimal characters in a posthumous moment to "the end of tragedy" or to the downfall of meaning and purpose. And as we learned from Bérénice, no new story can ever replace or restore the devastation. So all that takes place is 1) a repetition of the day's cycle—sunrise and sunset, the tide's rise and fall, the man who walks' departing and returning along the shore, the woman sleeping, waking, and anonymously giving birth (she does not mother her many children, who are not even part of the novel), the city of S. Thala burning down; and 2) a gradual and to the very end oblique act of remembrance of the ruined past at the voyageur's initiative, which leads to what the narrator calls "the heart of S. Thala," an empty ballroom in a casino by the beach where the voyageur finally recognizes the woman as the protagonist of a scene that had occurred seventeen years earlier, namely her "ravisement" 'ravishing.' This crucial scene, a *ravishing*—a violent and passionate dispossession of self that Lol goes through—is to *L'amour* what the end of Racine's *Bérénice* is to *Césarée*.

Residues of the destroyed past seem to be distributed among the personae's speech, their gestures, and the city of S. Thala, but while there is an intimate coordination among the

movements in these “sites,” they do not seem to relay the information to one another. Even within a single figure, the verbal and gestural channels seem disjointed (in a way much like the sound and image in *Césarée*), indicating the absence of a master self-consciousness, and instead the work of an unconscious force. When the voyageur is reminded by the other two figures that he has been in S. Thala before, the odd nature of his recollection and recognition of the space surrounding them is such that words and voice fail him:

– Ce n’est pas la première fois que vous venez à S. Thala.

Le voyageur cherche à répondre, plusieurs fois il ouvre la bouche pour répondre.

– C’est-à-dire... – il s’arrête –

Sa voix est sans écho. L’immobilité de l’air égale celle de la lumière.

Il cherche toujours à répondre.

Ils n’attendent pas de réponse.

Dans l’impossibilité de répondre, le voyageur lève la main et montre autour de lui, l’espace. Le geste fait, il parvient à avancer dans la réponse.

– C’est à dire... – il s’arrête – je me souviens... c’est ça... je me souviens...

Il s’arrête.

La voix au timbre lumineux se hisse jusqu’à lui, elle lui porte la réponse, sa clarté est éblouissante.

– De quoi?

Une poussée incontrôlable, organique, d’une force très grande le prive de voix.

Il répond sans voix :

De tout, de l’ensemble. (18-19)

– It isn’t the first time you come to S. Thala.

The voyageur tries to respond, he opens his mouth to answer several times.

– That is to say... – he stops –

His voice has no echo. The immobility of the air becomes the same as that of the light.

He still tries to respond.

They do not expect an answer.

In the impossibility of answering, the voyageur raises his hand and shows around him, the space. Having made the gesture, he manages to advance in the response.

– That is to say... – he stops – I remember... that’s it... I remember...

He stops.

The voice with the luminous tone hoists itself up to him, it brings him the answer, its clarity is dazzling.

– What?

An uncontrollable thrust, organic, of the greatest force, deprives him of a voice.

He responds voicelessly:
–Everything, the ensemble.

In the first line of this quotation the other man is not asking a question, but merely pointing out a fact. Neither listener expects an answer. Although they remark the voyageur's presence in S. Thala, they are not concerned by it. His compulsion to respond and the impasse it brings him to have to do, then, with the past. The quotation shows that, like the voyageur struggling to "avancer dans la réponse" 'advance in the response' the air and the light are paralyzed while this conversation takes place, and only when he points to "the space around him" with his raised hand can he try answering again. Space and the changes that develop it are intricately woven with the characters' words and actions, and so the halt in the voyageur's speech effects a halt in that space altogether: "l'immobilité de l'air égale celle de la lumière." He must acknowledge his presence in S. Thala as a return, so that the space sheltering them can continue its flows and shifts. Two traits that stage the ultimate problem in the novel appear in this way: first, a relation of dependence between this space called S. Thala and its characters, and second, the crucial role of utterance.³⁵

He claims, if voicelessly, to remember "everything, the ensemble," but it is the other's "voice with the luminous tone" that, with an actual question ("de quoi?") brings the response to the voyageur; his mode of interaction with the others betrays ignorance, misrecognition, and unfamiliarity with S. Thala. Although the novel unfolds through a spatial approach of the *ravissement* at the source of the strange place this man visits, it would be inaccurate to see the act of remembrance here as a progressive recuperation of pieces that build on each other to complete a picture. Within the novel's space there is forgetting, forcing each encounter to start from zero.

³⁵ Utterances in the novel are not restricted to phrases. Isolated words and screaming stress the act of brushing the limits of signification at play in the text and in the process of writing about love.

For example, having already spoken with the man who walks, when looking at him from a distance, the voyageur still needs to ask her who he is:

– Qui c’est?
Elle répond avec un léger retard:
– Il nous garde – elle reprend – il nous garde, il nous ramène.
– Ce parcours toujours égal... Ce pas si régulier... on dirait...
Elle fait signe : non.
Non, c’est le pas d’ici, à S. Thala. (24-5)

–Who is it?...
She responds with a slight delay.
– He keeps us – she picks up again – he keeps us, he brings us back.
– This pace, always so equal... such a regular pace... you would say...
She shakes her head –No, it is the pace here, in S. Thala.

Her answer is also slow to come and, like their dialogue, disjointed. More than a character in a plot, each figure is reduced to a function of S.Thala. Pacing regularly back and forth along the beach, the man who walks “keeps the city” by marking its perimeter and its pace, but then he also maintains that quasi-amnesic state, its out-of-order conditions as opposed to a productive one, as well as the text’s tension. In *L’amour* the man who walks and fascinates the voyageur with his pace figures a writing neighboring destruction: drawing or writing his path mostly along the seashore, the index of his trajectory is incessantly erased.

If, as the woman says, this man’s regular pace models S. Thala’s pace, the latter is itself modeled upon the regularity of the waves that cancel its traces. After all, S. Thala is an anagram of Thalassa, the primeval goddess of the sea in Greek mythology, born from Ether and Day. At stake is the force—in the figure of the sea—that disorganizes and dispels all efforts to master the territory. A goddess, the sea is a feminine destructive/creative force. As the sole proper name pronounced in the text, S. Thala reread Thalassa confirms the final balance between land and sea in the Durasian poetics of destruction, where the sea engulfs the land. Like the man’s footsteps, the continuous line of the written becomes broken by these waves, erasing any attempt of a

logical, traceable cause-and-effect configuration, and constantly renewing the surface. What does the man write along the coastline? If the writing, or the scanning of lines is like the camera in *Césarée* the writing is illegible, perhaps at the wipe of the slate the sea performs. But since he moves back and forth drawing a line, it may be a palindrome that never passes through the channel of speech, for instance the woman's ancient name: Lol—a line broken in two by a hole at its center. This would be then, as the narrator of *Le ravissement de Lol V Stein* defined it “un mot-trou, creusé en son centre d'un trou, de ce trou où tous les autres mots auraient été enterrés” (54) ‘a hole-word, whose center would have been hollowed out into a hole, the kind of word in which all other words would have been buried’ (*The Ravishing* 38).

The voyageur's gradual and fragmentary remembrance, at the same time a promenade through oblivion, occupies the entire novel: from the moment he first appears at the beach staring at the sea and at the two other figures who he initially interacts with as a stranger, to the final dawn, which he contemplates at the beach outside the casino, holding the woman asleep in his arms while he listens to the man who walks, keeper of S. Thala. The latter has set the casino on fire overnight after the voyageur and the woman visited the place, and by the other two he announces the dawn of S. Thala as a product of the woman's sleep (although he does not explain the why she is the agent of S. Thala's life). The voyageur serves as support for the reader's own trajectory along this enigmatic text insofar as he maintains, from beginning to end, his position as stranger in the effort of making sense of his mysterious surroundings and of his own participation in them. As his name, from the Latin “via,” etymologically conveys, he is the one who “draws a route,” which is to say that a pre-established path is missing.

If the man who walks is S. Thala's keeper, as the woman says (“il nous garde, il nous ramène”), the woman, as the man who walks repeatedly suggests, is S. Thala's creator. In cycles

that last a day (which corresponds to Hemera, “Day”—Thalassa’s mother) she sleeps intermittently and gives birth outdoors, and she walks the coastline behind the keeper. This is how the keeper of S. Thala speaks of her to the voyageur on the novel’s final dawn:

Le voyageur demande:

– Qu’arrivera-t-il lorsque la lumière sera là?

On entend:

– Pendant un instant elle sera aveuglée. Puis elle recommencera à me voir. A distinguer le sable de la mer, puis, la mer de la lumière, puis son corps de mon corps. Après, elle séparera le froid de la nuit et elle me le donnera. Après seulement elle entendra le bruit vous savez...? de Dieu?... ce truc...? (143)

Ils se taisent. Ils surveillent la progression de l’aurore extérieure.

The voyageur asks:

– What will happen once the light arrives?

One hears:

– For a moment she will be blinded. Then she will begin to see me again. To distinguish the sand from the sea, then, the sea from the light, then her body from my body. After that she will separate the cold from the night and she will give it to me. Only after that she will hear the noise you know...? of God?... that thing...?

They fall silent. They survey the progression of the exterior dawn.

His description presents the scene as a cosmogony, a genesis of the strangely divine place they live in, and it is her waking to the light (Aether, Thalassa’s father) that allows the space of S. Thala to unfold and spread out—“S. Thala s’étale.” And this process makes them silent; it forces a turn to the visual and cinematic as preceding linguistic articulation, like the nondescript “noise” of “God... that thing.” That the dawn is qualified as “exterior” of course suggests an “interior dawn” that would refer to her awakening, but also, in the light of the burnt casino’s ballroom just behind the figures, to the moment when Lol V. Stein lost her mind: the crack of dawn that put an end to the music and the dance between her fiancé and Anne-Marie Stretter, the woman who “ravished” him from Lol.

The “ravishing,” however, is also a kind of mystical experience, as the narrative of the ball night shows on describing Lol’s fascinated prostration while the lovers dance. Lol falls in

love and into madness. When the light finally pours into the ballroom the musicians stop playing and exit, followed by the lovers, and within this silence Lol, who wanted the three of them to stay there forever, screams. The real loss is not of the fiancé, but rather of Lol's self, and also of ordinary time, since from that moment of separation on she revives that instant again and again. As the narrator of *Le ravissement* explains: "Ce qu'elle rebâtit c'est la fin du monde" (52) 'What she is reconstructing is the end of the world' (*The Ravishing* 37). So the speech and memory disorders that traverse the three figures in *L'amour* is immanent to that unspeakable moment and to the "noise of God" giving birth to the end of the world.

On another night when the three figures gather on an island of S. Thala while the woman sleeps and wails, the keeper of S. Thala guards her sleep and the water's course, while conversing with the voyageur who has come looking for the woman. They equivocate her with the place before them:

– Regardez, regardez. Ici, regardez.

Il montre la rivière envahie, les déchirures de l'eau, le mélange des forces d'eau, la remontée brutale du sel vers le sommeil. La plainte appelle. La plainte crie:

Le voyageur dit:

– J'ai du mal à rentrer à l'hôtel, j'ai du mal à m'éloigner d'elle...

Il répond, face au désordre:

– Je comprends... – il montre devant lui – je comprends... moi-même je ne peux pas... regardez...

Il montre autour de lui la totalité.

La plainte appelle encore. (47; ellipses in the original)

– Look, look. Here, look.

He shows the invaded river, the tears of the water, the blending of forces of water, the brutal ascent of the salt toward the slumber. The wail calls. The wail screams:

The voyageur says:

– I have trouble returning to the hotel, I have trouble distancing myself from her...

He responds, facing the sea:

– I understand... – he shows before him – I understand... I myself cannot... look...

He shows the totality around him.

The wail still calls.

They both speak of “her” but he designates the sea and its rise to the island, and the narrator of this gesture describes the woman by her actions in that moment “the wail” and as a location in the scenery “vers le sommeil.” Everything about “her” is impersonal and involuntary, and yet gives life to the unusual reality these figures inhabit. The principle of love as seeing, examined in the first part of this chapter, is also in force in *L’amour*. After the insistent commands to look, and after the boats take off and the wails cease, all giving way to silence, the keeper of S. Thala pronounces a speech about “elle” ‘her,’ which again applies at once to the woman, the sea, S.

Thala:

– Objet du désir absolu, dit-il, sommeil de nuit, vers cette heure-ci en général où qu’elle soit, ouverte à tous les vents – il s’arrête, il reprend – objet de désir, elle est à qui veut d’elle, elle le porte et l’embarque, objet d’absolu désir. (50-1)

– Object of absolute desire, he says, slumber of night, around this time in general wherever she is, open to the winds – he stops, he resumes – object of desire, she belongs to whoever wants her, she takes and embarks him, object of absolute desire.

As the object of absolute desire, “she” is barely defined, impersonal, nameless, and non-exclusive. She is not consistently portrayed as a human individual (at a certain point in this scene, while she sleeps and wails, the narrator designates her as “l’animal rêvant” ‘the dreaming animal’), because, having lost her mind that dawn after the ball, her ipseity and everything that pinned her to the common reality was forever ravished. She reminds us of Bérénice in exile, Bérénice who becomes Césarée, the ruined seashore, holding on not to Titus, nor Antiochus, but instead to *love* as her only object. If this feminine object of absolute desire is the creator of S. Thala, its living force, it traverses and shapes the nameless characters, their speech, and even the writing the reader finds in *L’amour*.

The text’s fractured style thus enacts the work of maintaining the plane of consistency, in resistance to raising what, following Deleuze and Guattari, this chapter earlier located as the

plane of organization. In other words, if this ground became usable, productive, meaningful, it would no longer be the strange love Bérénice's exile disclosed. If S. Thala is the territory of *L'amour*, then writing must exert itself against the temptation of exiting that plane and building upon the fiction of an organized world; stylistically, this would appear in complete and articulate sentences, explicit names and identities, and in turning S. Thala into a normalized universe. What this fiction institutes can be defined as "the written." Conversely, love has to do with "writing": an always-new repetition that maintains the fragment.³⁶ While in Plato's *Symposium*'s account of love the fracture errant souls bear about the earth seeks repair in the encounter of the beloved with whom a whole is restored (a case of anamnesis, recollection of the previous, truer order of things), in S. Thala the other's encounter opens a vacuum in each one's speech and memory, which stages a severed relation to oneself as a self through the course of time.

If *amour* is the impersonal force dominating the text, the reader who encounters it must also become a stranger, by letting go of any preconceptions of what "love" means as well as of its valid manifestations. Its new shape emerges with the text: it blooms here in the very non-mastery of language, as writing bears the distinctive traits of lack of eloquence and the unfinished sentence, while meaning escapes a word as common as love. The absence of path the voyageur faces in S. Thala gives him his status, an absence telling of how language operates in *L'amour*. Through the speakers' broken sentences and the inexistence of passages that would link actions and situations, language displays the strain it inevitably suffers when submitting to love's force.

³⁶ In his discussion of the feminine function regarding the Other rather than the phallus as master signifier of language, Lacan explains that this is possible by her being "pas-toute" 'not-all' subjected to the phallus, which entails that the jouissance she experiences in her link to the Other for which a signifier is lacking, cannot be spoken. See *Encore*, . In connection with this logic, the truth for psychoanalysis, "est femme déjà de n'être pas toute, pas toute à se dire en tout cas" (*Télévision*, 64) 'is already woman insofar as it is not-all, unable, in any case, to be wholly-spoken' (*Television*, 45).

Writing, then, must itself become “amnesic.” A major use of the written is to provide a record of what was once present; as a technology, writing is a memory aid. In this way, a mnemonic derangement only makes sense in a space of writing whose lines—written with wandering footsteps and gazes, and with the waves—are constantly erased by sea waves. When the woman follows the man who walks the shore, she submits to the duty of “covering the distance, the space of the sands of S. Thala” (32) in order to produce the plane of consistency. Along the shore the promenade must recommence every day. Highlighting a (dis)appearing of the traces that would striate and map the terrain, all this useless walking stages the estranged perambulation writing endures to inhabit Love-S. Thala: an undomesticated, hollowed surface where an immanent desire prevails.

The memory exercise at work in the novel does not result in recovery or reconstruction of the forgotten past as the state of affairs preceding Lol’s falling ill/in love, which would amount to the voyageur’s establishing a permanent path and eliminating the text’s constitutive absence.

A leur gauche s’étale l’énorme masse du coeur de S.Thala. Sa façade principale domine la plage. (121-2)

To their left the enormous masse of the heart of S. Thala unfolds. Its main façade dominates the beach.³⁷

Within that enormous, massive heart is the empty space *L’amour*’s voyageur revisits with the woman; without it, his voyage wouldn’t be accomplished. It is the site of that crucial scene that unleashes the dismantling of ipseity, the end of the world, and the beginning of love. While Lol V. Stein saw her fiancé fall in love with another woman, named Anne-Marie Stretter, as they danced until the dawn, a separation—a spacing—took place on the dance floor, that exemplary

³⁷ The English translation loses the alliteration ‘s’étale... S.Thala.’

arena of desire where individuals, often longing for an encounter, trace with their steps, to rhythms and sounds, aimless lines on an empty floor.

In his search for the memory at the source of S. Thala's present situation, and of his own presence there, our *voyageur* gravitates around an impossible origin, in a quest for which there is no satisfaction.³⁸ However, the arrival at the nodal point where the answer to his inquiry should finally be given introduces that shift of perspective, from the subject viewing this object as the cause of his desire, to the perspective of *ravissement* on the edge of language and brushing the void. *L'amour* never speaks of "the ravishing" directly, and its characters clearly encounter a verbal impasse whenever they try to do so. The most eloquent attempt at discussing this traumatic scene is during this promenade, "the voyage" to the heart of S. Thala, as they call it. To explain the strange aspect of the city, the *voyageur* points out

– Tout a été retiré avec les affaires personnelles.
– Quand ? – elle a ralenti.
– Quand pour la première fois vous êtes tombée malade – il ajoute – Après un bal.
Elle ne répond pas tout de suite, elle sourit:
– Oui, je crois. (112)

–Everything was taken away with the personal objects.
–When? – She has slowed down.
–When, for the first time, you fell ill – he adds –after a ball.
She does not immediately respond, she smiles:
–Yes, I believe so.

At last that past event to which the characters' reality and discourse continues to be intimately linked is—if obliquely—verbalized. Both can identify a specific instance of her having fallen ill, as expressed by the emptied out state of the surrounding space. They see "the exterior emptiness" here, just like the previously mentioned "the exterior dawn." Resembling the language assailed

³⁸ In terms of the psychoanalytical subject he operates according to the death drive, bound to repetition by a drive that, unlike instincts, is impossible to satisfy. For an explication of the drive in Lacan, see Braunstein, Néstor "Desire and Jouissance in the Teachings of Lacan" in Rabaté, Jean-Michel (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

by chasms that weaves the text, the city suggests the sense of that traumatic memory at the heart of S. Thala as an event of removal. The woman's present detachment from what they recollect here exemplifies, precisely, the clearance of "les affaires personnelles," of personal property, and the self, personhood, hinges on this exactly.

Even the white purse she carries for this "voyage" is empty, except for a mirror from where the void gazes or reflects the city.

Il regarde: le sac est vide, il ne contient que la glace. Elle le ferme, elle dit:

–Un bal.

–Oui – il hésite – vous étiez, à ce moment-là, supposée aimer.

Elle se retourne, lui sourit.

–Oui. Après... –*elle retourne au temps pur*, à la contemplation du sol... (113; my emphasis)

He looks: the purse is empty, it only contains the mirror. She closes it, she says:

– A ball.

– Yes – he hesitates – you were, at the moment, supposed to love.

She turns around, smiles at him.

– Yes. After that ... – *she returns to pure time*, to the contemplation of the ground...

Because the event at the source of the situation they find themselves in is a "ravisement," that is, a rapture and dispossession to the extreme, a positive, nameable and explainable location and interpretation of origin, of the origin of the empty state of affairs, is impossible; it requires the illusion of an enduring self that this event of ravishing has done away with from the outset. The voyageur seeks an answer in the enounced, denying its radical discontinuity to the empty, posthumous moment of enunciation in which they are caught, and denying that, because what took place was a ravishing, there is nothing to find there (and this needs to be read as the encounter of nothing itself, one would say "en personne," 'in person/in no one'). Her attitude throughout the novel and particularly in this scene models, instead, coherence with the nature of this event. Insofar as she does not go about looking for an answer in the past to make sense of her present, she has access to another mode of temporality, which the narrator of the text calls "le

temps pur” ‘pure time’ to which she returns. What does the realm of pure time she inhabits imply? Unlike subjects holding past experiences as their possessions, she cannot take agency over this recollection of an illness and a love experience that nonetheless involved her most crucially. *Le ravissement* confirms the event’s effect of radical detachment, in a description of how strangely Lol relates to her own memory. The fissure the ravishing operates on her gives her access to “the pure time” of this event:

Elle sourit, certes, à cette minute pensée de sa vie. La naïveté d’une éventuelle douleur ou même d’une tristesse quelconque s’en est détachée. Il ne reste de cette minute que *son temps pur*, d’une blancheur d’os. (*Le ravissement*, 53)

She smiles, yes, she smiles at that remembered minute of her life. The naïveté of some eventual suffering, or even of some commonplace sadness, no longer plays a part in it. All that remains of that minute is time in all its purity, bone-white time. (*The Ravishing*, 37)

Her detachment stresses the quality of S. Thala’s inhabitants as vessels permeated and even directed, like actors, by some law or force: that unknown—ravishing and ravaging—force of love. Its relevance is far from undermined by the omissions of the crucial center or heart of the story. Rather, they insist on appearing negatively, circling the speakers’ limit or point of failure. Something non-verbal takes over where words leave off. In the previous passage of *L’amour*, the woman’s turning gestures start to enact the ball. In dance-like fashion, (Lol) “se retourne” ‘turns around,’ and after turning to him “elle retourne au temps pur” ‘she returns to pure time,’ which is not so much a positive moment as the singular rhythm of this dance, “le pas d’S. Thala” ‘the pace of S. Thala.’ Her bodily gestures perform the obliqueness and repetitiveness of their dialogue. For unlike linear, forward walking, dancing keeps bodies dwelling unstably within a limited space, retracing their own steps, as the woman and voyageur do verbally, turning upon the ball scene. Retracing, rereading, is a “jouis-sens,” says Lacan, as long as it is *not* directed at “comprendre, piquer dans le sens, mais le raser d’aussi près qu’il se peut sans qu’il fasse glu...

jouer du déchiffrement” (*Télévision*, 40) ‘not understanding, not a diving at meaning, but a flying over it as low as possible without the meaning summing up the virtue, thus enjoying the deciphering’ (22). Music, then, and drawing: dancing. In both *Le ravissement* and *L’amour* this minute of pure time makes Lol smile: what the dance steps write cannot be translated into words, and neither should what the wandering gaze reads; so can pure time, or absolute desire, be enjoyed here according to her love experience, “une joie immanente au désir” ‘a joy immanent to desire’ and not to a cause or a goal as Deleuze and Guattari proposed, a “gay savoir,” a joyous knowledge of love as this pure time, of the edge of language, of writing the void, and a jouissance of the Other, but never of the self.

If to see is to love, as the beginning of this chapter proposed, to dwell in the plane of immanence is to become its immanent desire, to dissolve in its flow. Duras knew this and wrote it long before *L’amour*, at the end of her 1959 film script *Hiroshima mon amour*, the love story in that city, between a Japanese man and a French actress making a film there, ten years after Hiroshima was destroyed by the nuclear bomb at the end of the Second World War, and after her lover, a German soldier, was killed in her hometown. From their love affair and their aimless nocturnal meanderings in Hiroshima, during which Elle (She) tells Lui (Him) her until-then buried love tragedy, they draw a kind of knowledge, which the script’s final lines express:

Elle:
Hi-ro-shi-ma.

Elle:
Hi-ro-shi-ma, c’est ton nom.
Ils se regardent sans se voir. Pour toujours.

Lui:
C’est mon nom, oui.
[On est là seulement encore. Et on restera là pour toujours]. Ton nom à toi est Nevers.
Ne-vers-en-France. (*Hiroshima* 124)

Her:
Hi-ro-shi-ma.

Her:
Hi-ro-shi-ma is your name.
They look at each other without seeing each other. Forever.

Him:
It is my name, yes.
[One is there only still. And one will stay there forever.] Your name is Nevers. Ne-vers-en-France.

In *L'amour*, S. Thala follows that very order:

... Il demande:
– S. Thala, c'est mon nom.
– Oui – elle lui explique, montre – tout ici, tout c'est S. Thala. (66)

...He asks:
– S. Thala is my name.
– Yes – she explains to him, shows – everything here, everything is S. Thala.

For Duras, in order to dwell in the site of desire—where love is indissociable from destruction, where the land is engulfed by the sea—a becoming-woman is indispensable, and so is a becoming-seascape. And to write there, is to write an always new repetition of the spacing that gives birth to desire, absolute desire beyond words and the visible: “rien que le tout.”

CHAPTER THREE

Precious Liquids, Vessels, and Transfusions in Louise Bourgeois' and Kiki Smith's Installation Art

"When you see your reflection in water, do you see the water in you?" –*Roni Horn*

In the narratives Louise Bourgeois offered to her interviewers (mainly resorting to episodes from her personal history from the perspectives of trauma, sexuality, and the family romance) the spider—a figure her gigantic, building-size sculptures present as at once threatening, protective, industrious, fragile, murderous—was a metaphor for the/her mother. Whether or not viewers are aware of the artist's personal history, blowing up the scale of a spider to the size of a tall building produces in them an effect of shrinking and of relating to the piece as a small creature—a child, perhaps even an insect. Disproportion is a fundamental strategy here, for a short circuit in the human as autonomous and sovereign is intended as part of the aesthetic encounter. By making autonomy and sovereignty—those pillars of a humanly productive, useful mode of relating to the world—obsolete in this encounter where scale is inverted, the work conveys a physical feeling of exposure and vulnerability in the viewer, and it also reveals, beneath the principle of non-contradiction that sustains a sovereign and autonomous kind of agency, ambivalence and ambiguity as correlative experiences to that of being alive.

This chapter considers a way in which the questions of being alive, embodiment, individuation, and inhabitation, are raised within aesthetic experiences of dwelling and reading at the threshold. A sculptural installation by Bourgeois, entitled *Precious Liquids* (1992) (Figure 22), which forms part of her *Cells* series, featuring a wooden water tank inside which more objects are arranged, and two sculptural installations by Kiki Smith—*Untitled* (1986) and *Untitled* (1987-90) (Figs. 29 and 30)—each featuring a row of twelve empty 6.5 gallon glass

carboys, each labeled with the name of a human body liquid for a total of twelve, place the viewer at the threshold of inside and outside, of life and death, of soma and psyche, of macro and microcosmic scales, of the visible and invisible, of word and image. In doing so, these works outline a site at which reading ceases to be a distant and disembodied act to take on a vital role. Summoning the unconscious, as this chapter will show, the works engage, transform, and disorganize their reader's living body in ways that claim the latter, a permeable vessel, as a body of *immanent desire*, understood as a force whose fluxes at once traverse, assail, disorganize, and fuel bodies.¹

All of the vases and vessels these works of art feature are proposed to the viewer as containers of “precious bodily liquids,” yet in order to seize upon their preciousness, it is necessary to let the work engage the viewer according to its own material, spatial, conceptual, and affective conditions. In this way, the body enters into a creative connection with the piece, and becomes a part of the work, which has a productivity of its own, irreducible to the order of utility, as this chapter will explain. The threshold of individuation as locus for the work of art reveals the latter's vital operation: the transmission—or transfusion, insofar as blood is the vital bodily fluid par excellence and a direct connection between reader and work is at stake—of sensations.

¹ Deleuze and Guattari give an account of this creative process in the body in its relation to immanent desire, opposed to teleological and transcendental principles in *Comment se faire un corps sans organes?* As mentioned in this dissertation's introduction, in *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation*, Deleuze details the way in which Bacon's painting creates a body without organs in its treatment of the painted figure and its effect upon the viewer's eye, namely its hystericization of the viewer's body and the development of a “haptic” or tactile eye. Deleuze proposes, following Bacon, that painting—and the work of art—directly (without the detours of reason) transmits sensations that are only available in the creation particular to art. In this study, Deleuze implicitly returns to the concept of the *desiring machine* developed a decade earlier with Guattari in *L'Anti-Oedipe*. This concept presents the logic of partial objects as a productive process of cuts and flows through which heterogeneities “hook up” to one another in a creative way. The connection between the viewer and painting in *Logique de la sensation* is in terms of the desiring machine: where meaning, representation, and form are relinquished for a focus on intensities, forces, and sensations in a non-imaginary register. This chapter's analysis, of the thought Bourgeois' and Smith's works lay out sculpturally and conceptually, demonstrates in singular ways their attunement to this kind of interaction between viewer and work in a specific engagement of the eye, interlacing reading and viewing in between scales and in between surface and depth.

Turning the body's insides out and therefore the viewer's eye inward (in more than one way, as we will see) are important aspects of Bourgeois' and Smith's tri-dimensional production. What does this field of the body offer to the work of art? Before entering the domain of the living body's insides and its liquid products, let us linger a moment longer with Bourgeois' spider concept. In addition to its above-mentioned contradictory and paradoxical characteristics, its shape and habits simultaneously cause repulsion and attraction: there is symmetry and maybe fine curved lines in a spider's shape, but also fangs, and it builds houses, but they are also deathtraps, which makes it all at once strikingly constructive and destructive. A gigantic spider renders ambivalence and ambiguity manifest in a privileged way. It was for its perplexing features and its destabilizing effects that Bourgeois incessantly returned to sculpting spiders so large that they could shelter humans.

In proposing the spider as mother, moreover, Bourgeois recognized an important, uncanny dimension that is frequently denied in the mother's idealized portrait as a source and keeper of life. The mother as spider even explicitly entails a non-human dimension, whose effect in the viewer physically encountering these large sculpted bodies that could house him/her, as female wombs once did, is dehumanizing, at least in terms of self-agency. A physical dehumanizing effect takes place in the viewer confronted with something that evokes this Thingly dimension of the (m)Other.² Perhaps this effect attains a deeper and more radical level when not

² In *Ethique de la psychanalyse*, Lacan posits Freud's *das Ding* 'the Thing' in contrast to the object, as having the status of what is absolutely Other for the subject of the unconscious. In sublimation (which can take place through the work of art), Lacan explains, "the object is elevated to the dignity of *das Ding*." The latter is beyond representation, so instead of representing, the work of sublimation consists in fashioning a signifier for what is not representable, thus turning upon a void as an act of creation. Lacan points out that it was Melanie Klein who situated the mythical body of the mother at the center of *das Ding* (127), and immediately refers to its connection to sublimation in art, through a reference to a text called *A Theory Concerning the Creation in the Free Arts*. He explains that this text concludes that sublimation is an effort at the symbolic reparation of the imaginary wounds inflicted on the mother's body, which Lacan is not convinced by, although he sees its value. Given the listed features of the spider figure, it is probably no coincidence if "the face of God" in its absolute otherness, appears as a giant spider, in Ingmar Bergman's film *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961). Bourgeois explores the Kleinian theory in some

only scale is inverted, but the viewer's body image is also turned inside out.³ As a process of embodiment and of entering physical space, sculpture is in Bourgeois' and Smith's work connected to an experience of foreignness of what is most intimate, which a bodily process of exteriorization can exemplify (it is implied in the spider's life, of course, as it builds its house from its own body's silk-spinning organ), and of intimacy with what remains foreign or Other, even if sheltered "within" "my" body. "Extimité" 'extimacy,' a neologism introduced by Lacan (*Ethique* 167), offers a topological name for this experience.

Cellular Dwellers and Dwellings

Extimacy compromises the "I's" autonomy and the sense of property over a body that appears to be "mine." Articulating images and words, Kiki Smith offers an articulation of this foreign agent in the body and of the body's foreignness in a tri-dimensional wall piece called *The Cells—The Moon* (1996):

of her works, especially in *She-fox*, as she explains in various interviews. See Amei Wallach's interviews in the film *Louise Bourgeois: the spider, the mistress, and the tangerine*, and Mignon Nixon "The *She-fox*: Transference and the 'Woman Artist.'"

³ Catherine de Zegher's "The Inside is the Outside: The Relational As the (Feminine) Space of the Radical" examines this theme in the work of Brazilian contemporary artists Lygia Clark and Anna Maria Maiolino, who focus on the digestive tract. Maiolino follows Clark and the Rio de Janeiro neo-concretist movement's proposal "to look for an equivalent of the work of art... in living organisms," which entails processuality as a central feature of the work. Processuality includes the process of viewing and reading, as Bourgeois' and Smith's pieces show.

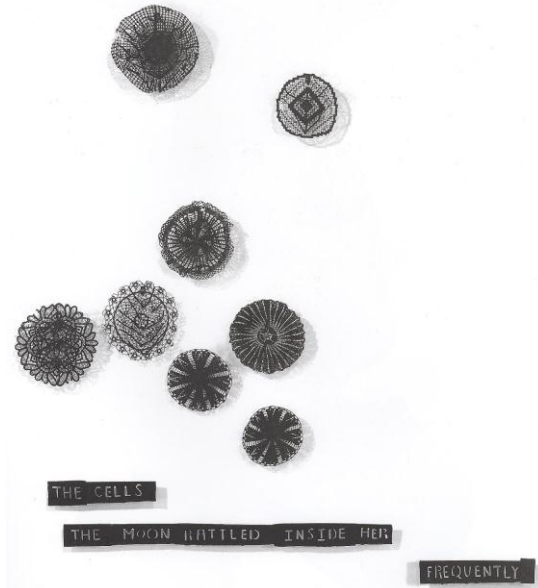


Figure 16. Kiki Smith, *The Cells—The Moon* (1996) ©2011 Kiki Smith. Photo by author, June 12, 2007.

Scattered above the three metal strips of words—“The Cells” “The Moon Rattled Inside Her” “Frequently”—the eight different circular bronze weavings remind of lace. Smith, who made them herself, thinks of them in terms of a crafting process, as doilies or mandalas.⁴ Yet she sets them up against white walls instead of house tables, and offers them to view in relation to ‘cells’ and ‘moon’—two words whose referents in the world can bear this circular shape as well, often looked at through a microscope or telescope, for they belong to two different cosmic scales. The wall is visible through the holes formed by the different weaving patterns, suggesting permeable pieces of fabric, in varying degrees of density. Some of these cells are a bit ripped at the edges, so they do not seem like perfect, intact circles. These disturbances appear as effects of violence, a hypothesis enhanced by the conjugated verb in the piece: ‘rattled.’ This verb also connects to the woven metal and, emphasized by the word ‘inside’, evokes the image of a rattling cage. But the container here, instead of a cage, is “her.” If the reader remains within the boundaries of the

⁴ “The works based on doilies, which seem to me like cosmic mandalas sort of trickling onto the coffee table, into daily life... the doilies have a lot of possibilities. I cast some in bronze, and they became orifices... In another one, they turn into eyes, and in others they become moons or cells or snowflakes” (41). “In Her Own Words. Interview by David Frankel.”

line where “inside her” appears, what this ‘her’ kept imprisoned and rattling its cage, is the moon. Instead, if the three word strips are considered as three lines forming a single phrase, inside “her” there are ‘cells,’ which “the moon rattled frequently,” perhaps in the way it makes sublunary ocean tides rise when it is full. In both cases this “her” is inhabited, haunted even, by a strange, disquieting force. Her body (for if cells dwell inside her she ought to be a body) is at the threshold, in between two cosmic orders. If the words below the bronze weavings are read together, their message glosses the image; a viewer can then see cells hung up on a wall, as if extracted from inside her, whoever this third person singular pronoun ‘her’ refers to.

Smith’s piece weaves distant realms together (cells and moon), and proposes to the viewer an exercise of weaving the verbal and non-verbal,⁵ intellect and body, as the process of reading heterogeneous, juxtaposed fragments (thus, having considered spiders and their architectural production in the first pages of this chapter, in this context it is not difficult to see the doilies/mandalas/cells/moons as also cobwebs). Meaning is undetermined on this white wall, but it forms a web whose signifiers flicker, and they in fact do so in consonance with some of Louise Bourgeois’ production. Through a process of creative repetitions, Bourgeois’ work spun a web in which signifiers intersect in different ways; the *Cells* constitute a thread of exploration where, as in her spiders, ambiguity and ambivalence are brought to the fore, embodied in space through an effect of disproportionate scale. Already in the title of this series, ‘cells’ are semantically ambiguous in designating at least two kinds of things, whose manifestations, moreover, can vary widely.

Cells were the small rooms inhabited by monks before 1664, when the word was used by Robert Hooke to describe his first visual encounter with the tiny hollow structures of cork in

⁵ For more examples of Smith’s production with text, see Katz’ “Kiki Smith’s *Logophilia*.”

*Micrographia, or Some Physiological Descriptions of Minute Bodies Made by Magnifying Glasses With Observations and Inquiries Thereupon.*⁶ The term was thus coined for biology, and eventually it came to designate the minimal units of living organisms. Biological cells are basic organic units where there is tension: a material or plastic tension, due to the effort of stretching out and holding the structure together and, of each cell linking to the other to build an organ, and a kind of affective tension, insofar as autonomy is noticeably not established in any permanent and strong way in a cell, but rather, constantly negotiated. Life easily shifts to death and vice-versa in a cell, where countless chemical reactions occur at once. Thus, as the building-blocks of the organism, they figure an on-going, tense, precarious process of (dis)individuation. A finite, barely organized unit of self-contained life, a cell charts a liminal realm, in between organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate, molar and molecular existence.

Just as the body's cells can take on many different shapes, according to the organ tissues they compose, the cells individuals inhabit can have widely different atmospheres. Between monks and imprisoned criminals or the insane, a great distance in affective connotations and atmosphere is possible. Cells are figures of ambiguity insofar as, tied to notions of safety and preservation, cells imply the exposure of life (psychical and physical) to mortal risk. And they also incarnate ambivalence, insofar as their borderline rejects, accepts, and ejects, can be threatened by and need what is foreign to them, and must even expel some of itself in order to live. Creation and destruction seem less like two distant poles when living space is restricted to its extreme minimum. Notwithstanding their precariousness, biological cells are microscopic machines of astonishing creative and destructive potential,⁷ and the same can be said of other cellular varieties. History has highlighted various radical moments of creation born in solitary

⁶ "Observation XVIII. Of the *Schematisme or Texture* of Cork, and of the Cells and Pores of some other frothy Bodies." "Cells" appears among other metaphors ('pores,' 'honeycombs,' 'boxes,' 'bubbles,' 'bladders of air').

⁷ Fission, mitosis, meiosis, and metastasis, when the cells are cancerous, are some of these processes.

confinement; authors such as Cervantes, Sade, Verlaine, and Wilde were forced into it, and Montaigne, Sor Juana, Dickinson, Proust, and Kusama, to name only a few, famously lived in voluntary isolation.⁸ Early and medieval monastic culture, where cells offered spaces to read, meditate, pray, write, compose, swoon, etc., modeled many advantages of enclosure for Western civilization. Reduced space enabled a kind of seclusion from the public and social world where each soul could devote time to its spiritual, intimately close relation to God, through which it perfects itself.⁹ Yet isolation of individuals in cells also has its long, dark story, as a social control measure to clear public space from pathology and disorder by destroying the imprisoned individual's life.¹⁰ Conversely, the cells of the French resistance provided a non-hierarchical, clandestine form of insurgent activity. In the latter, the interest of resisting penetration by another (larger, constituted) force foregrounds the biological cell's most elementary function: to develop an enclosure for survival and, so as to preserve it, to control access of external agents through its selective permeability.¹¹

Bourgeois' *Cells*, each an installation in the size of a shelter for an individual, exploit the double meaning of 'cells' as much as their variety in look and ambiance, such that ambiguity and ambivalence surge forth.

⁸ It was as a prisoner that Verlaine produced a poem collection he entitled *Cellulairement*. In different ways, some of these "cellular" authors, distant and unconnected to each other in their own time, happen to come together in the field of contemporary art. Kiki Smith, for instance, includes Sor Juana in an artist book called *The Blue Feet* (Oaxaca, Mexico: Carpe Diem Press, 2003), combining verses by the Golden Age Mexican nun and poet with drawings of body parts and stars, on blue paper. Emily Dickinson's poetry becomes a component of Roni Horn's sculpture project called *White Dickinsons* (see chapter one of this dissertation). Proust is present in much of Sophie Calle's art, as the following chapter will show in more detail. Yayoi Kusama is a contemporary artist long ago diagnosed with schizophrenia, who of her own will lives and works in a psychiatric hospital.

⁹ Enclosure, "intimately close, inside" also offered a privileged space for the cultivation of particular modes of eroticism within monasticism, as a dimension of the soul and its love relation to God. See Cary Howie's *Claustrophilia: The Erotics of Enclosure in Medieval Literature*.

¹⁰ See Michel Foucault's presentation of this problem in *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, and Georges Canguilhem's *Le normale et le pathologique*. Sexuality is, of course, a central problem in this knot made up of the physiological, psychical, and political realms. The cases of forced confinement listed above, for instance, are strongly tied to sexuality in a variety of ways.

¹¹ A membrane encloses a cell, allowing nutrients to enter and wastes to be expelled to its surroundings.



17. *Cell XXVI* (2003) <http://images.artnet.com/images_US/magazine/reviews/mason/mason1-7-09-15.jpg>



Figure 18. *Cell (Glass Spheres and Hands)* (1990-93) <www.pbs.org/art21/artists/bourgeois/card1.html>



Louise Bourgeois - Red Room (Child) - 1994 - Mixed Media, 53 x 139 x 198 in. - © Louise Bourgeois
Collection Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal - Photo by Marcus Schneider

Figure 19. *Red Room (Child)* (1994). Collection Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. Photo: Marcus Schneider © Louise Bourgeois.



Figure 20. *Articulated Lair* (1986) Museum of Moderna Art, New York. Photo: C-Monster
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/arte/2067226959/>

Bourgeois walls her cells with different materials, ranging from old doors to mesh, and even an old wooden water tank—in the case of *Precious Liquids*, which is the *Cell* examined

here—, so they may look more or less like a cage or other imprisonment or torture device, more or less like a bedroom, a home, a display cabinet, a reliquary. They are secret and sometimes also sacred stages, spatially *set apart* (as in the etymology of ‘sacred’) from everything that surrounds them by these membranes that allow the eye to peek through their openings; and they are mysterious, since the combinations of objects that inhabit them—from mirrors to sculpted body parts, to a guillotine, to strange hanging sacks, large spheres, and spindles—do not offer an obvious meaning or purpose. And yet, the atmospheres they help to constitute have the power to affect the viewer/visitor who approaches them and to transmit sensations.

Enclosures: water tank and barrel and organism and room

It is necessary to come close to view *Precious Liquids*. But before getting too close, one must read the metal label that wraps around, near the top of the wooden cylinder’s contour: *Art is a Guaranty of Sanity*.



Figure 21. Louise Bourgeois, *Precious Liquids* (1992) Cedar, iron, water, glass, alabaster, fabric, embroidered cushions, clothing, 427 x 442 cm Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'art moderne, Paris. ©Adagp, Paris 2007.

As with Bourgeois' giant spider sculptures, the effect of scale over the viewer here imposes particular conditions of the viewing experience. With its double meaning, the cell opens up two reading adventures, and the viewer who undertakes them is proposed two roles. If the structure is viewed as a shelter, and the semi-open side doors do invite one to approach the artifact in this way, one remains human. Still, an old water tank makes an unusual living unit, in the architectural sense, for a human being. Approaching this artifact, preparing to enter cell and water tank, the viewer's own role is noticeably strange. Encountering, in *media res* and in an involuntary way, what appears as a new, unknown moment, the human viewer enters into the position of a dream's protagonist.¹² So as to carry out the research the work itself proposes, where a dream's protagonist is a crucially important stake, one must embody this first-person position in the analysis of *Precious Liquids*. In including something out of order, maybe absurd, dreams often have this wavering, metonymical way of presenting spaces—at once a water tank, a room, and a cell, for instance. Their mystery and their web of signifiers are thus articulated. That these are the conditions to engage with this work indicates that it summons the unconscious.

Bourgeois' *Cells* put to work this oneiric weaving, where the operations of metonymy and of setting the stage for a protagonist's unknown present to unfold, characteristic of dreams, are proposed as also particular to art. Such operations, then, should have to do with art being "a guaranty of sanity." Whose sanity? At this point in the process of approaching the piece, and within the frame of experience it sets one in, it is only logical to assume that one's sanity as

¹² Mieke Bal points out the relevance of the dream structure in Louise Bourgeois' work in "Autotopography: Louise Bourgeois as Builder." Bal presents an equation "art-dream," drawing on psychoanalytic theorist Christopher Bollas' "unthought known," which is a particular reading of Freud's dream theory. See also her essay on another Cell by Louise Bourgeois: *Spider* (1994): *Louise Bourgeois' Spider; The Architecture of Art-Writing*.

reader and viewer is in play. Although there is also the possibility that the cell, obstructing one's visibility and way, and enclosing an interior space, serves to keep someone else from stepping out into the open space I occupy. This other could be inside the cell because s/he is insane, or on the contrary, to preserve his/her sanity. One cannot, however, establish a correct or definitive account here. Those very visual and spatial restrictions, and its circular enveloping of a hidden nucleus also suggest a biological cell's mode of operation, which puts me in the position of an alien element coming into contact with a living unit, this time biologically, and if entering the cell is at least possible, then I must be a very small, molecular living thing. Within the dream, it is possible for my role to waver and vacillate as well.

Contours and bidirectional flows

Sculpting space, this piece's enveloping gesture—a fold—sets up the differentiation between inside and outside, at once isolating what is inside and organizing two interactive fields. Also, the possibility and temptation of transgression—in both directions—originates with this distinction. The fold produces a contour, or membrane, a liminal site where elements, flows, can pass through. In fact, the gesture of wrapping around an interior implies a certain degree of compression of its content, which promotes the content's action of seeping out or overflowing the liquid container. The wooden cylinder squeezes around a circular site it produces, organizes space by pressing into a nucleus, and contracts whatever fills it within—a human body, a body of water or air—into shape, introducing at once the possibility of this body inside spilling out of such a shape and into formlessness. Also, perhaps the content's efforts to break out of their prison force the contour to sustain, in the way the heart pumps blood, a movement of distension and not only of contraction. But nothing appears to be physically overflowing so far, at least not to the naked, human eye. Then again, while no microscopes or magnifying glasses are involved

in the viewing process, the interaction this cell has led me to is already altering my eye's function. The cell seems to develop and transform one's eye according to its necessities, giving rise to the level of sensations in an otherwise only perceptual and cognitive act. What lies inside the mysterious water tank? To find out, one must peer into its interior, that is, pass through the membrane and into the cell somehow. As water and liquidity are present in title and tank, and a door on the tank's side is half-open, a kind of seepage is indeed plausible.

Curvatures and detours

But the operations of *Precious Liquids* start outside and need to be carefully accounted for. Bourgeois' water tank is cylindrical, and so it curves the space that surrounds it, and the same happens with Kiki Smith's twelve carboys, which this chapter will examine further on. The barrel draws up a contour, places me outside (whereas, until then, I considered myself to be indoors, within the gallery's walls), wrapping around some content it occludes from an outsider's sight. But is it really something? Is it empty, a nothing, a void? In any case, there is reason to wall it and bar it from unrestricted access, to frame it, distinguish it, and almost close it off from the rest of the spatial continuum of the gallery. And this has the effect of curving space as well; the sculpture thus invites me to begin approaching it with a stroll around its perimeter.

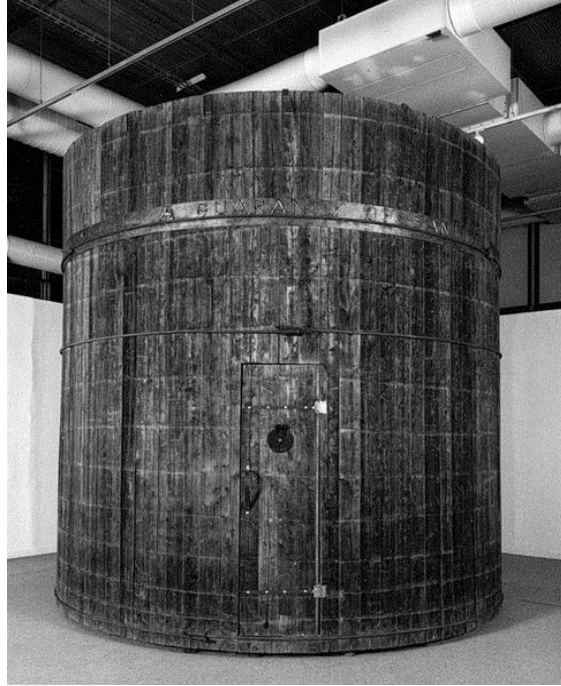


Figure 22. *Precious Liquids* (external view, closed doors) Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'art moderne, Paris. ©Adagp, Paris 2007.

Circulating along its walls and considering the phrase it offers, “Art is a guaranty of sanity,” I look for more clues, perhaps more words or windows. There are two half-open doors to this *Cell*,¹³ facing each other with the steel foot of an individual bed between them, occupying the center within. One could, then, literally pass through the vessel in walking straight ahead through its doors, but this would entail as much of a spatial and physical constraint as my gravitation around the curved surface. The rest of the wall is made of contiguous wooden panes; they rise above me one after the next, more or less evenly, and an intimate light sometimes glows between the cracks.

My stroll ends at one of this *Cell*'s doorways. I stop at the threshold, since access to its interior is restricted to the eye. And here my eye's vision suffers a shift: from scanning a convex, opaque and dark segmented surface larger than myself, to reaching into the deep center's

¹³ This is how the doors are usually encountered in the museum, but they could be closed, as the image above shows. The flexibility of display in installation art is a property that enhances a sense of instability and of not dealing with objects as static and permanent.

composition, where a variety of materials, shapes, lines, light, and shade, are gathered and carefully, enigmatically disposed about the place. From the point of view of sensations coming across to the viewer's body, my eye in this case, they are inhabitants of the *Cell*.



Figure 23. *Precious Liquids* (Internal view from a side door) Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'art moderne, Paris. ©Adagp, Paris 2007.

Still, one can easily identify a small, single bed, which suggests that same space of light, shade, textures, shapes, and depth, as an individual's isolating chamber. *Precious Liquids* demands a bifocal technique, in correspondence with the two cosmic spheres, molar and molecular, that the concept of the cell traverses, as previously explained. What does each lens afford? If the molecular can be considered to be a realm where perception cannot identify what lies before it as the objects of everyday interaction, and where what is perceived is impersonal, neither dependent on nor relevant to the narratives that human existence gets caught in, then the molecular can be a privileged realm to bring perception to the level of sheer sensations. In this sense, the molecular favors an aesthetic experience. Consequently, the molar supports the narrative and figurative dimension of the dream, which is necessary to make one's way through the channels and vessels this dream sets up.

Nobody home

The absence of a dweller in this room reinforces one's role as a researcher, a kind of detective in a mystery. Can this dwelling be seen, from a molar perspective, as the monastic cell from which biological building blocks and prisoners' isolating chambers derived their name? Silence prevails in this enclosed, softly lit atmosphere; the bed as resting space could emphasize, if not silence, at least quietude. Mobility is evidently restricted in the room and in the very small bed as well; it is a space for a body's retreat, voluntary or not. Since the body appears to be absent, I wonder, could the dweller, maybe a monk or nun, come back? Or has s/he escaped? My speculations are the effect of seeing from the threshold, which as far as I can see constitutes the only point of view upon this scene. Looking in at the threshold and between the cracks (let us not forget the door is not fully open) maintains the strong sense of imminence. It feels as though something were about to happen. When I take my body as reference to look around this interior I am drawn to the bed—a repository for an individual; I realize that this introduces for me another, hypothetical viewpoint on this room, of someone who actually inhabits it and is familiar with what, to me, appears as a strange, almost incoherent combination of objects.

What the bed's owner would see before him/her is a section of the inner, wooden, concave wall, framed by two sets of objects lying in the room against this wall: on the left, a pair of light, beige rubber spheres are set on the wooden floor, and in that enclosed space they appear as disproportionately large as the bed seems small. A similar pair of spheres, but in dark cedar, rests symmetrically to the right of the bed's foot. Between these two sets and centered at the foot of the bed lies yet another, smaller sculpture: a repetition in alabaster of Bourgeois' *Le trani episode* (1971). Consisting of two oblong, perpendicularly superimposed parts, each marked at one of the tips, what this sculpture evokes oscillates between male genitals and female breasts.



Figure 24. *Precious Liquids* (detail. Lamp sculpted from the mold of Louise Bourgeois, *Le trani episode*, 1971). Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'art moderne, Paris. ©Adagp, Paris 2007.

On its own, *Le trani episode* puts ambiguity to work in a piece that interrogates the sexualized and gendered body by blurring clear anatomical distinctions,¹⁴ but framed within the *Cell* the oblong lumps take on a new function: laid one on top of the other perpendicularly on the wooden floor, they connect the separate sets of spheres and point to the bed, and the piece glows, lit from within, like a night lamp discreetly illuminating a bedroom.

Bed as viewpoint

Lying in bed, if the dweller lifted his/her gaze above ground level, on the right s/he would see a long, black fabric hangs high. It is some sort of coat on a hanger, suspended above the dark spheres, which now take on an aspect of body parts belonging to what becomes another supposed

¹⁴ Rosalind Krauss presents this piece as exemplary of what she sees as mid-twentieth century sculpture's concern with partial objects, and of Bataille's concept of *l'informe*, produced by "an unthinkable mutation within form in which oppositions are collapsed" (71). "Louise Bourgeois: Portrait of the Artist as *Fillette*."

body that cannot possibly be the *Cell*'s usual dweller, nor the user of the bed. Insofar as Bourgeois' oeuvre repeatedly produced genital forms (*Le trani episode* among them), the two, symmetrical compositions in contrasting shades might suggest, with the breasts/penises piece in between them, something like opposite sexes. From a molar perspective and noting the gigantic size of these figures against the tiny bed, one *could* say that they stage the mother-father poles of a triangle, where the bed turns into the index of a child. The scene set before the bed could be the child's unsettling dream—on the occasion of a fever, perhaps, since the bed is surrounded by a vertical structure of vessels that recall the oxygen tanks of a hospital—representing sexual difference. The father's trench coat half-concealing another, white piece of cloth underneath seems especially threatening.

So the eye might cease dwelling in a monastic cell, to find itself in an oppressive child's room instead. The composition facing the bed could then be understood as traumatic. But although a child is imaginable, designating the actors of this scene as mother-father-child would determine a subject, the child, in a way that would keep us from considering the many factors operating all at once. Moreover, the very fact that I can shift, from a monastic cell to a child's room and posit hypothetical dwellers and characters is proof against a definitive deciphering of the mystery. Again, all this building verbally offers (like a trace of another voice addressing the viewer/visitor) is "Art is a guaranty of sanity." If this building is art, perhaps its guarantee of sanity consists in prohibiting a stable, definitive point of view and a corresponding narrative. And that is exactly why standing at the threshold is crucial, because otherwise I would all-too-soon step inside and miss experiencing a scission between sight, pouring into the cell, and the rest of the body staying behind. It is not that I am becoming a disincarnated soul by leaving my body at the threshold to go inside only optically. It is more of a surrendering to some kind of lag

that, like Smith's bottles that compartmentalize the twelve distributed body liquids, distributes an 'I' most often imagined as a unified whole, identical to itself at every following instant.

Thresholds of the ineffable

No words appear inside this *Cell*; the emblem "Art is a guaranty of sanity," wraps around the barrel's outer walls. I visually entered the cell with those words, and the title in my mind. But the engraved words and my body remain at the scene's contour, at its threshold, as if words and my imagined human body could, at most, delineate that silent interior. Is it the silence of something sacred? "Precious liquids" inflects what I see with its connotations, which are Christian. The "Precious Blood (and Flesh) of Jesus Christ,"¹⁵ shared in the famous Last Supper before the Passion, is commemorated in Christian faith. Communion rituals include storage of the Eucharist in a tabernacle, its own special cell; the gesture of putting it away and setting it apart from everything else affirms its sacred, precious status, just as a temple's walls enclose sacred space unlike the mundane space that lies without. The function of blood in Christian and so many other religious rituals is sacrificial. It symbolizes an expenditure of life through which something is made sacred, as implied in the etymology of 'sacrifice' 'sacer' 'holy', 'facere' 'to do or make.' The value of blood is in general precious, as the substance that keeps a body alive, and in sacrifice as the substance offered, at the price of a life, to make a holy bond with the divinity.¹⁶ An interaction between the reader and the cell's sacred interior takes place. Perhaps then, this aesthetic interaction somehow forms a precious bond as well. How? As shown thus far, viewing and reading are key practices in this relation to the work. Blood is not visible in this

¹⁵ This form of Catholic devotion refers to the blood shed by Jesus during the Passion, venerated as a relic, and especially cultivated during the 19th century. See "Precious blood" in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*.

¹⁶ The singularity of Christ's sacrifice lies in his already holy being, in being God. 1 Peter 1:18-9 reads: "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish."

experience and the word 'blood' is not written either. Where are the precious liquids? What are they besides blood? And as the body in the cell is missing, whose liquids are they?

While silence pervades the wordless cell's interior, there are more objects to consider inside *Precious Liquids*. Hovering around both sides of the bed is the collection of clear, empty glass vessels, some spherical and some shaped like hourglasses. It was necessary to get out of this bed to see them as anything else than hospital-room oxygen tanks and saline solution dispensers, those external organs plugged into a body to support the organism when it is helpless. And once the bed ceases to be the viewpoint, its missing mattress becomes visible, as does the water stain and small puddle on its bare surface. It is as if water (holy water?) had dripped from the vessels, although this is not actually happening while viewing takes place. In fact, they are not connected to each other and each one's top and bottom is open, which makes them dysfunctional as containers. A procedure other than the one the container/repository affords is ultimately at work in this cell.



Figure 25. *Precious Liquids* (detail. Bed and glass vessels) Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'art moderne, Paris.
©Adagp, Paris 2007.

The major container walling a vacant room multiplies within, with these glass vessels wrapping around empty space. While water does not pass through the vessels, the indirect light cast by the above considered alabaster night lamp inside, and the lights illuminating the gallery outside, do traverse them; agglomerated in this way they shimmer, reflecting light on each other's surface against the shadows and casting reflections of their shapes on the walls. The place is silent, but vibrant, subtly flickering, and this fuels a sense of imminence independent to whether a monk, nun, or child might come back inside any moment soon. A passage from major to minor occurs with these vessels inside the water tank. A vital passage, since otherwise *Cell* would have imprisoned the eye in the confines of a family romance.

Having gone through these vessels, in a second look the composition of sculptures and a huge hanging trench coat does not convey the father figure; a “molecular” act of viewing allows me, for instance, to dissociate the piece of cloth from its habitual use by human beings, and to perceive instead its plastic qualities. This way of looking reveals the leftover, carcass quality of the sagging, hanging cloth, and its light suspension above the weight and gravity of the spheres below it.

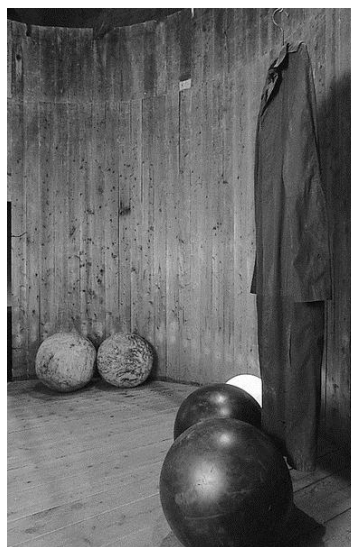


Figure 26. *Precious Liquids* (detail. Hanging trench coat and spheres) Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'art moderne, Paris. ©Adagp, Paris 2007.

Myriad minimal movements and an intensive activity occur in the cell even when every object appears to be frozen still, still life. In order to see this it is necessary to adapt the eye to another reading and viewing process. The sense of residue conveyed by the little water puddle on the bed surface, the hanging trench coat, the objects lying on the floor, and the relation of horizontal and vertical lines, drawn by the bed and the standing and hovering artifacts, create a kind of tension within this cellular space, which makes me look up and notice the cell is roofless. It is as if a force of ascent were exerting itself toward the open top of the cell, and out of it.

A kind of escape from the Cell's confinement, as through a vanishing point, takes place in the moment of viewing; a kind of death process, maybe, whereby life frees itself from a tight container, as the last breath leaves an agonizing body.



Figure 27. *Precious Liquids* (detail. Bird's-eye view) Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'art moderne, Paris.
©Adagp, Paris 2007.

It is not quite a transfiguration, however, but more like a biological phenomenon known as tropism, where a turn or growth, propelled by some kind of stimulus, is observed in an organism. Tropisms are triggered in organisms by an external element (e.g. sunlight, water, a virus or

pathogen, etc.). Here in *Precious Liquids*, perhaps it is my viewing process that prompts an imperceptible evaporation of the cell. Evaporated liquids can rise, through the vessels, and out of this cell's lidless top. An overflow induced by the constraints of confinement, containment, is an aesthetic procedure at work in this *Cell*.¹⁷ This viewing process is not simply external to the cell, but rather, at its threshold. Tropism implies my passage to the interior, a passage that destabilizes the imagined whole body, unhinges the eye and forces vision to balance between molar and molecular. It is also a tropism that turns viewing, at the membranous contour, into a permeable site for the passage of sensations.

The Distributive Property

Earlier, when an ill body lying on the bed surrounded by oxygen and saline solution tanks was imagined, the function of these vessels as external, prosthetic organs supporting the body was mentioned. As in Kiki Smith's *The Cells The Moon* (Figure 16), this image within Bourgeois' *Precious liquids* (Figure 26) subtly suggests an exposure of the inside of the body, and in both cases a visual representation of this interior in as realistic and accurate a way as possible is besides the point. As noted, the body that would sleep on the bed in Bourgeois' *Cell*, the individual who would call this room his/her own, is absent; instead there is this distribution of objects, or sculpted bodies. While I go through them visually, my own physical experience is of a dissociation—between sight, reaching into and traveling throughout the cell, and the standing body at one of the doorways, and also between this standing body and the one walking around the cell's perimeter to look and read what is on its surface. If there is no individual inside

¹⁷ Bourgeois' *Cells* have been compared to Beckett's *Malone meurt*, for the figuration of confined, agonizing spaces in both works. See Crimp, Catherine. "Louise Bourgeois and Samuel Beckett: Space and the Materials of Memory." In this caption of "tropism" as the *Cell*'s event, the sensation it communicates would find its best literary parallel in Natalie Sarraute's *Tropismes*. For instance, in V, a humid, hot silence fills and compresses a living space, forcing a dweller's senses to wait, tensely, for something to tear this interiority made of silence: "... C'était dans cette chaleur, dans ce silence –un froid soudain, un déchirement. Et elle restait sans bouger sur le bord de son lit, occupant le plus petit espace possible, tendue, comme attendant que quelque chose éclate, s'abatte sur elle dans ce silence menaçant."

the cell, it is perhaps because the biological cell's work is to disintegrate and distribute (molecular) bodies, so as to create other configurations of life. And if this process affects me by engaging with the work as viewer, then it is possible that this large water tank, a vessel like the ones inside, is also a prosthetic organ to me, and more radically, that the vision with its dreamlike quality is of the unknown inside of what I thought of as "my" body, an inside that lies outside.

Both Smith's *The Cells—The Moon* (Figure 16) and Bourgeois' *Precious Liquids* are works interested in triggering the feeling of extimacy in the acts of viewing and of oscillating between viewing and reading according to the plastic, spatial, figural, and conceptual conditions of the work. Both target the viewer's body as a living thing with an unknown interior and present it in an intimate scene that stands outside of me, upsetting the notion of the body as a coherent whole that forms an autonomous individual, for whom the separation between self and other is unambiguous. In doing this, vertiginous sensations allow the vital and desiring body to emerge and incite the viewer and reader to think according to this logic, which introduces the "precious," "sacred," "divine" perspective on the body. To follow this *other* thinking process, this chapter will now turn to Kiki Smith's *Untitled*, 1986.



Figure 28. Kiki Smith, *Untitled* (1986) Twelve clear glass bottles, $20 \times 10 \frac{1}{2} \times 10 \frac{1}{2}$ in. ($50.8 \times 26.7 \times 26.7$ cm) each. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of The American Contemporary Art Foundation, Leonard A. Lauder, President, in honor of David W. Kiehl 2006.78a-l

Walking along the row from left to right, the labels on the glass surfaces read: semen, mucus, vomit, oil, tears, blood, milk, saliva, diarrhea, urine, sweat, and pus. The carboys or water coolers are $20 \frac{1}{2}$ " by $11 \frac{1}{2}$ " in diameter. Unlike the label on the water tank in Bourgeois' *Precious Liquids*, or the strips of words below the bronze woven circles in Smith's own *The Cells—The Moon*, on this piece words' connection to objects seems direct, with the role of labeling and unambiguously determining the function of each container. And yet, the liquid substances these words refer to are unusual to think about outside a medical or very intimate context. Also striking is the disproportionately large size of the carboys in relation to the fluids they correspond to; they seem far too big to be lab sample containers for a single human's products, upon a single draw or expulsion. Scale again affects the viewer's relation to these containers. They bring to mind the viewer's own embodiment under the aspect of a container of these twelve body fluids, and their disproportionate dimension might recall childhood, as in Bourgeois' *Precious liquids* or in her *Spiders*, or also the abrupt shifts in physical dimension a fictional character such as Alice in Wonderland (who Kiki Smith likes to etch) endures.¹⁸ But if the human, adult-sized viewer cannot fill these carboys instantly, perhaps s/he could in due time. And time is a prominent component of this piece, already because the process of looking, reading, and walking, under these large-scale conditions, requires it. The seriality of the bottles matches my series of steps, required to face each of the glass carboys, and it underscores the spatiotemporal flow in which reading and viewing take place.

¹⁸ Particularly, the passage in Carroll's novel where Alice, turned into a giant upon consuming a strange substance from a bottle, starts to cry and floods the room with her tears, which she ends up having to swim in, due to a subsequent, abrupt shrinking experience. See Smith's *Pool of Tears 2* (Figure 1).

Having produced this piece, Smith created a second version of it, *Untitled* (1987-90), where the only difference is that the glass that the water coolers are made of is coated in silver:



Figure 29. Kiki Smith, *Untitled* (1987-90) Silvered glass water bottles, Each bottle 20 1/2" (52.1 cm) x 11 1/2" (29.2 cm) in diameter. Gift of Louis and Bessie Adler Foundation, Inc. © 2011 Kiki Smith

In this version, rather than looking into the empty containers, the viewer finds his/her reflection in the mirror while reading. In this way, the work draws attention to the reading body and the multiplication of images, a distribution in twelve parts that resonates with the earlier explored distribution, of several objects arranged inside Bourgeois' *Cell*, and of the viewer's body distributed between the cell's threshold, its cylindrical perimeter, when strolling around, and inside, when looking in.

Repetition and the Real

There is a strong consonance between Smith's row of empty glass carboys and Bourgeois' vessels in *Precious Liquids* (Figure 26): it appears in the oscillation between quietude and tension the empty, shimmering centers impose, charging them with an intense sense of imminence. There are also shared elements between these two works whose impact is not only visual, as in the uterine, rounded glass figures, the images of liquid containers, their emptiness, their seriality and multiplicity; but also atmospheric, at the metonymical juncture of devotional practices and an air of clinic, lab-work and pharmacology, the risk of contamination, a healing process; and even kinesthetic, in the particular modes of exploration they demand from the

viewer's body, and the destabilizing shifts to inhuman scales. Furthermore, both Bourgeois and Smith work with repetitions, as shown in this series of labeled water coolers, and as noted in the incorporation of Bourgeois' earlier *Le trani episode* sculpture within the *Precious liquids* installation (Figure 25). Bourgeois' series *Cells* itself presents this process in twenty-six pieces. At stake is a need to transmit something whose exploration is only possible through configurations of a particular web of signifiers, in paths that bring the reader and viewer who follows and searches through this web to a limit of interpretation, an ineffable, or to adopt Freud's expression, a kind of navel of the dream, where the real is transmitted according to the logic of sensations. In this particular configuration of Smith's and Bourgeois' water containers, the question of life, a fluid life immanent to desire, is what they present as resisting full symbolization, that is, full containment or apprehension. This is what, in an analogy to the sacrificial expenditure of life that blood represents, makes the various bodily secretions considered in this chapter "precious" in their quality of useless remainders. In a different, more recent project with Roni Horn (2005), Louise Bourgeois repeats her title "Precious Liquids," and below it lists none other than the names of body fluids featured in Kiki Smith's two rows of carboys (minus 'diarrhea').¹⁹

Found and Lost

In the encounter of my bodily surface with the silvered carboys' inscribed surfaces, the names of bodily secretions or expulsions blatantly point out that, independent of self-will, these flows are produced and contained below my bodily surface. So at the same time that, in this second version of *Untitled* (1987-1990), I find my reflection on the surface during the reading process, the work insists upon the disintegration of my organism's imaginary integrity, lost to the

¹⁹ This omission recalls the symbolism of feces in psychoanalysis, and in Christian and alchemical traditions.

separation of the body's materiality into twelve bottles of fluids.²⁰ Smith's carboy mirrors disturb the integrated body image that, as Lacan's famous piece on the "mirror stage" suggests, has its origin in early childhood, when the mother's gaze through the mirror enables it to recognize and integrate its own image. If the mirror stage is aimed toward a unified self-image (which Lacan never ceases to denounce as illusory or misrecognized), then the carboys, through the words meeting one's reflection at the surface in what must be a thingly, non-maternal gaze, dismantle this unity. But all does not simply then dissolve into indistinct chaos for the viewer. The display of containers for body secretions in equal status marks the striking distance between sensations evoked by 'tears' and 'pus,' for instance. Neatly polished, aligned and arranged, these carboys, and the thoughtfully compartmentalized fluids, uphold the tension between disintegration and containment.

This split is conceptual, temporal, and affective. Each fluid named on these mirrors relates to a different system within the body, and connotes different, more or less affectively intense states of the body that can sometimes be very distant from one another. Sharing the mirror space where I find my reflection, words such as 'pus,' 'vomit,' and 'diarrhea,' short-circuit my self-image and the principle of non-contradiction that upholds it; they cast a particularly abject light on this body that is me and is expelled, in substances that I cannot identify with, whose idea is repulsive to me, but are nonetheless generated in me. Instead, secretions such as 'semen' and 'milk' evoke contexts in which the body experiences states whose register is distant from the abject, where the liquids might productively pass from one body to another (for procreation and nourishment). The distribution into twelve containers

²⁰ Felix Gonzalez-Torres proposes this split as well, in *"Untitled" (Orpheus, Twice)* (1991): two full-body sized mirrors standing side by side to duplicate the viewer's image.

expresses, then, not only the compartmentalization of organic systems, but also of inconstant states of being in which these different fluids appear.

Smith's variation on the initial composition insists on the reader's and viewer's involvement in the piece as a living body familiar with the referents of these names, and it also makes one compare this later version to the latter, which casts a new light on the sheer emptiness of the clear row of carboys. Having gone through the exercise of thinking about my body as a container of body fluids, this emptiness is shocking in a new way, for, to fill them, the container that is my body would need to empty itself out, surrender its precious liquids. There is this problem, and also the possibility that, as I look through the glass, these carboys are being strangely filled with an emptiness within me, or that, like Bourgeois' *Precious liquids*, they present my interior outside of me, before my eyes, and that this extimacy is also concerned with empty centers.

Reading in Embedded Temporalities

As seen in Bourgeois' *Precious Liquids*, metonymy allows heterogeneous threads to come together at once in the work of art's dense tissue. With their narrow necks, the shape of the open water coolers in Smith's *Untitled* recalls that of a uterus or bladder; yet at the same time, made from a single model, their identical dimension and shape bears an indelible mark of industrial production that clashes with the organism's mode of production, the results of which the carboys are supposed to receive and contain. Disproportionately large lab samples or the pharmaceutical industry also come to mind, insofar as human physiology is registered in these names of body fluids.²¹ One thus sees modern and contemporary traces from such an angle. To complicate things further, Kiki Smith has declared that the bottles are inspired by a medieval

²¹ In context with other early pieces by Smith, the medical laboratory reference is obvious. See, for example *Kiki Smith 1983* (1983)—a glass microscope slide with the artist's bloodstain, or *Hand in Jar* (1983).

textual tradition. Past ages certainly resurface in these engraved words' Blackletter type. Smith's declared cultural references can be considered in the light of what the artwork does, for its possible connection to how these references functioned, which contributes to a notion of the aesthetic these works articulate.

Smith is not referring, despite the connotations of physical health or illness in these body fluids, to a medieval health handbook such as the *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, but to books of hours. Word and image, writing and painting, are tightly interlaced in this personal prayer book tradition that spanned Medieval and Early Modern European culture.²² Using *Horae* implied structuring one's day according to the prayers corresponding to specific moments in the day. They entered lay culture as a luxury during the thirteenth century (before printing appeared and when literacy increased), displacing an originally monastic prayer practice. Their use was individual, and personalization of this portable, intimate device went beyond inscription of the owner's name; her portrait was often included on the same page as the painted biblical scenes, typically beholding them while kneeling with clasped hands, in prayer. A mirror-like aspect is thus present in these artifacts, then. While the sequential format of books does have the effect of distributing the reader's experience into different pages, scenes, hours, rather than offering an instantaneous presentation, unlike the surface of Smith's water coolers, here the book owner's portrait establishes a correspondence between him/her and the moment of prayer; it reiterates possession of the book and the owner's presence within the hour of prayer. Like a shelter, the book of hours seems to contain its owner.

While the book holds its owner's hours together, bound to and contained in the individual body of the book, insofar as *Horae* are organized by the progression of Christ's life events, from

²² Books of Hours feature the transition from manuscript to print: a parallel, at the level of process, to the bottles' uniform manufacturing against the fluids' organic production.

the Annunciation to the Resurrection, where miraculous phenomena of embodiment and the spilling of tears and (precious) blood are central, they necessarily have to do with bodily disintegration, extractions, and expulsions, which are the aspects Smith's carboy installations verbally foreground. Besides Biblical scenes and prayers, *Horae* contained a calendar, frequently including an image of a naked man flayed at the torso, whose organs each presented a cord leading out of the body to a planet or zodiacal signs. Each planet or sign had an influence on a particular organ. Surrounding the planets in the anatomical drawings by the Master of Anne de Bretagne (1500), for instance, are the four temperaments personified, and also textual advice regarding the right time, according to planetary and zodiacal alignment, to bleed a body (a common medical healing practice) according to its temperament. For instance, the lower right-hand text states: "Quant la lune est en taurus, virgo et capricornus, il fait bon saigner au melancholique" 'When the moon is in Taurus, Virgo, and Capricorn, it is right to bleed the melancholic.'



Figure 30. Master of Anne de Bretagne, *Planetary Man*, 1500. <<http://www.themorgan.org/collections/collections.asp?id=129>>

Smith's piece *The Cells—The Moon* (Figure 16), about the moon that rattled the cells inside her frequently, reveals here its relation to this type of illustration.²³ In the phrase, the complement “frequently” implies, then, the moon's cyclical temporality, which the image above shows to be influentially connected to the body's cyclical temporality as well. More specifically, the moon is connected to *her*, menstrual and lunar cycles having the same length.

Why does Smith resort to this outdated cosmology? Whereas the modern, scientific paradigm would place a medical view of the individual's body and a religious view of the soul in different compartments, probably even in different books, in the same way that a scientific study of celestial bodies would not share its textual space with an anatomical treatise, here in the book of hours these realms are woven together. The dissected man by Master of Anne de Bretagne

²³ Indeed, in the Middle Ages, the moon and sun counted as planets. See Wieck, Roger S. *Painted Prayers. The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art* (36-37).

even recalls the languid body on the crucifix. But the point Smith's work makes in turning to this pre-modern cosmology is not simply nostalgic; it is not about a golden age when the human body was attuned to nature and there was a correspondence between the cosmos and the individual. In fact, the irreducible gap between the life of instincts and the life of desire where the body dwells does not cease to be outlined by the works of Smith and Bourgeois; it manifests in the strictly useless yet profoundly intimate experience they engage their viewer in. And it is also underlined by the displacement and reinstallation of everyday useful objects for an encounter where their syntax forms a unique oneiric web of signifiers to express something untranslatable, a singularity upheld around a void, a Thing. While nature and the human body are not harmonized, the dysfunctional organism and desire are instead thoroughly interlaced in these works, and this perspective in its strong sense is also not offered in the modern anatomical handbook.²⁴ Soma and psyche, as the multiple meanings of 'cell' demonstrated, are indissociable in the particular realm Smith's and Bourgeois' work outline; these contemporary works locate the "preciousness" of life in the very material bodily liquids, moved by foreign forces. Also, they explicitly introduce the viewer's corporality into reading and viewing experiences that are about thinking *with* sensations, which is why the transmission of this thought requires that the viewer and reader go through an experience with a work of art, rather than consider the body and desire in an only theoretical register. It is in this therapeutic or clinical sense that "Art is a Guaranty of Sanity."

Pleasures Oral and Temporal

²⁴ Psychoanalysis instead is concerned with exactly this perspective of the desiring speaking body, and it only makes sense that it has both a theoretical and a clinical dimension, and the latter is concerned with singularities. Louise Bourgeois was interested in child psychoanalysis and her creative process often explored Melanie Klein's ideas on the death drive and aggression, where the mother's breast is the quintessential part-object of ambivalence. See Nixon's *Fantastic Reality*. Gilles Deleuze was also concerned with the body of immanent desire and found art and literature to be privileged realms that explore it, not only on the side of the artist or author in the creative process, but also in the reader's interaction with the work. He thus discovers a "clinique de l'hystérie" by observing the effects of Francis Bacon's paintings on the eye.

Medieval culture conceived of reading as a corporeal and spiritual practice, strongly tied to meditation and prayer, as it materializes in Books of Hours. An act of oral *incorporation* in one's memory was performed through (vocal) reading and meditation, the first two steps of a devotional program called *Lectio divina*.²⁵ Prayer and contemplation follow, according to the monk Guigues du Chastel: "Reading, as it were, puts food whole in the mouth, meditation chews it and breaks it up, prayer extracts its flavor, contemplation is the sweetness itself which gladdens and refreshes."²⁶ At the level of reading, one's breath, voice, and rhythm-sensitive body were crucial. Thus, portable, personal devices such as *Horae* introduced the divine into worldly life by engaging not only daily, seasonal, and yearly cycles, but also an individual's organism and self-image. "For the medieval devout," Laura Sterponi explains, "central spiritual practices, such as reading and prayer, are quintessentially carnal activities" (671). Bodily sensations and enjoyment are activated in this erotically charged spiritual practice, then. In introducing this medieval meditative reading practice to her work, Smith underscores embodied life where it is not just a matter of the organism that runs on food, is not only sustained by nature and instincts, but rather, and crucially, a matter of what this chapter has called immanent desire. In an analogy of eating as an erotically intense experience, Guigues presents the reading process as remarkable and precious in itself, rather than as an instrumental procedure for a transcendent purpose. As a consumption, the reading act that this monk convokes Christians to is precious, a luxury unsubordinated to the logic of usefulness.²⁷ And this is a vitally important lesson which Smith's and Bourgeois' works repeat.

²⁵ "Reading in the Middle Ages" (671). Sterponi's article presents the connection between *Lectio divina* and books of hours, which I draw upon here.

²⁶ *Scala Claustralium*. Caput III. Quoted in Sterponi, Laura. 673.

²⁷ In *La part maudite*, Georges Bataille discussed the limits of this logic of productivity and its coexistence with that of sumptuary, useless, or "unproductive expenditure." Deleuze and Guattari highlight the fact that these expenditures, or "productions de consommations" 'productions of consumptions,' far from constituting the end of a

The reading process Smith's carboys incite to is one that brings thought to the moment of contemplation, which is simultaneously a moment of being embodied, breathing, pacing, looking. Moreover, embodiment is the *sine qua non* of the reading practice, and insofar as this embodiment is within space and time, it is not permanent, given once and for all, but rather transient in the very act of repetition that sequences—of hours, or carboys—imply. Some of the body liquids mentioned in the *Untitled* rows of carboys correspond to bodily cycles: through urine the body eliminates toxins, breast milk intermittently feeds another organism, blood oxygenates the cells, and female bodies eliminate blood in monthly cycles. This brings attention to the fact that there are twelve of these carboys, a number that corresponds to months that constitute a yearly cycle, the measure of human individuals' life. Earlier this chapter wondered about the implications of the carboys' size, and suggested that if a human body could not fill them all at once, perhaps this could be done in time; is it through the cycles of years comprised in a lifetime? Evoking the twelve months of the year, the twelve units composing each *Untitled* row propose contemplating life unpurified from the death inscribed in it, of which the reader is reminded through notions of expulsions and fluidity, for they convey the body's solidness dissolving.

The incorporation and enjoyment at work in the medieval contemplative reading practice presented here takes time; the reader must offer or devote his/her time to this process, so incorporation does not only fill a living body: it implies a simultaneous process of gradual giving, or giving up of the body's life. Smith stresses this aspect by evoking the body losing or letting go of its precious contents. While reading incorporates life it also releases and offers it,

process of production, are an active part of a creative process, if one is willing to step beyond "la sphère supposée indépendante de la production humaine en tant que déterminée par "l'utile" (*Anti-Oedipe* 10. n.3) 'the supposedly independent sphere of human production as determined by what is "useful".'

and such an act can be thought of as the body writing, producing its own trace or remainder;²⁸ this simultaneous process—of reading and writing, of consumption and expenditure of precious life—is what Smith’s work repeatedly underscores and wants to make the viewer reflect upon, as modeled by this sculpted female body turning its head back to trace its own red trails flowing from between its legs onto the floor:



31. Kiki Smith, *Train* (1993). Wax with beads. 134.6 x 139.6 x 427cm. © 1998 Kiki Smith

The trails the figure sees itself leave behind are definitely expelled from her body, a body whose life entails unproductive expenditure, its wasting away as it unravels in time and space. Why a female body, why menstrual blood spilling onto the floor to make this particular point, and what does she read in this train of blood? Because it points beyond the reproductive function of sexuality, to a feminine position of overflow or surplus, and so to a kind of enjoyment, a jouissance that is detached from meaning, the operation that keeps language within a useful

²⁸ Writing or marking with the body has been recurrently explored in contemporary art. Famous examples include Yves Klein’s paintings with female nude bodies as paintbrushes (for which he was attacked by feminists); Duchamp’s *Paysage fautif* (1946) marked with semen on Astralon, features a waste of reproductive cells for art; Pollock’s action painting involved his pacing and dripping the paint on the horizontal canvas; the Viennese Actionists present canvases with cow’s blood and procedures that involved cutting the body in precise ways; actions by Gina Pane, a founder of *art corporel*, documented sustained self-mutilation until body liquids flow.

sphere. Menstrual blood is sheer waste; Smith sculpts it beautifully, in glistening red glass beads and winding trails that write unreadable lines on the floor. Observing these trails behind her, the sculpted woman's body models the kind of viewing and reading the work of art calls for. The viewer and reader's body is called to this feminine position; when she without an ulterior purpose contemplates and enjoys the art piece—this trace left behind by the artist—she spends, wastes, offers time, and thus continues to produce the work of art. The following sections detail this.

Unfolding, Collecting

According to the *Lectio divina*, to incorporate words into his/her mind, the devout medieval reader offers up the voice, letting it flow out through the mouth. And in this the reader's voice resembles the secretions named in Smith's *Untitled* carboy installations: their degradable nature is evanescent like a voice's invisible materiality. Something, in both cases, irretrievably pours out of a body. Books of hours certainly stress not only the praying individual's voice but also her unfolding in time by way of a dehiscence whereby her interior, undoing itself, is released onto the present moment, and left behind as the temporal flow continues and this present becomes past, like the blood trails the sculpture turns back to in Smith's *Train* (Figure 32). The moment of emergence from within the body into the phenomenological space and time, and from being imperceptible to becoming visible (or audible in the case of reading out loud, according to medieval prayer technique), is in Smith's work an index of the dying body, but also a moment of creation in which something new becomes written.²⁹

²⁹ The feminist movement by artists in the 70s, 80s, and 90s returned to the idea of the creative body, particularly through the female artist's body as a creative source. Carolee Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* (1975), for instance, is a famous action piece where the artist stood naked on a table before an audience and gradually pulled out a scroll from her vagina and read its text, a gesture to assert the divine, self-creative status of the woman artist. Smith's work is

Surface as Threshold

Perhaps because of the newness that derives from the passage from imperceptible to perceptible, and from inside of the body to its emergence outside where the eye can observe it, Smith's work devotes special attention to materials that form the surface of a piece.³⁰ The work records events where something until then unnoticed or unremarkable surfaces, as this chapter has shown in the readings of the two versions of the twelve labeled carboys: the reader and viewer's bodily surface becomes involved with the mirrored surface, in the silvered version of the carboys (Figure 30), and the eye seeps through the transparent glass, optically porous, to observe the containers' emptiness in the first version of the piece (Figure 29). The eye's action is similar to the one demanded by Bourgeois' water tank with its open door and restricted access. Besides offering a signifier, the words in Blackletter highlight the surfaces of these carboys, and make noticeable the difference between looking through and looking at the surface. But the glass in the twelve carboys of *Untitled* (1986), delimiting an empty interior and the viewing act as taking place outside, also materializes the irreducible, but all-too-often neglected in the effort to see through, fragility of enduring life. Through this dynamic of seeing through and into the depth, and reading on the surface, as well as in relating the incommensurability of celestial bodies and the cellular structure of human bodies, in the style of the Middle Ages, Smith's work outlines and situates the reader and viewer at the threshold of life and death, of (dis)appearing, of (dis)individuation.

neither limited to nor centered on this affirmation of the woman artist, however. On the creativity of the present, fleeting instant, see chapter one of this dissertation, on "the now" in the work of art through Roni Horn and Clarice Lispector.

³⁰ Also to the surfaces on which the pieces are placed. Her work often takes over the gallery floor, as seen in *Train* (1993) (Figure 17), where the sculpture stands on the floor and spills its red trails onto it as well. This use of the gallery space interrogates the gesture in which the artistic object becomes consolidated. As mentioned earlier in the discussion on Bourgeois' *Precious Liquids*, the cell's sacred aspect has to do with setting a spatial interior apart from the rest of space. The direct interaction with the floor explored by Smith has an effect of sculpted and living viewers' bodies sharing the same space, again a way of drawing attention to the living body in the act of contemplation, and of the sacred interior of the body overflowing profane space in unexpected gestures.

Bourgeois and Smith often condense multiple historical moments into a contemporary piece. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the two-scale signifier ‘cell’ entered the world of biology in the seventeenth century, through Hooke’s book on the experiments he performed with a magnifying glass. Critics such as Mieke Bal have studied magnified scale in contemporary art as a neo-baroque gesture, noting the shifts in scale also present during this historical period, conceptually and stylistically marked by experimentation with optical instruments and the scientific revolution, which introduced the infinitely large and small to the eye and the imagination. What the concept of the work of art that Bourgeois and Smith put forth is concerned with in resorting to these exaggerated scales, is enabling for the reader and viewer, as I have stated, an experience of standing, or rather wavering, at the threshold: between two stable spheres or fields—where life emerges as a strange Thing (pulsing, rattling, flowing, coursing through, voiding³¹) in the intimate depths of the body—rather than standing within a space tailored to human dimension, reassuring this viewer or reader of his/her autonomy.

In baroque times and terms, Blaise Pascal wrote an extraordinary reflection upon this vertiginous, liminal site. An exceptionally long fragment of his *Pensées* is on “disproportion de l’homme,” ‘man’s disproportion’; Pascal’s thoughts on this matter were that he was caught between all and nothing, floating adrift between the infinitely large and the infinitely small. He considered man as “le fini entre les deux infinis qui l’enferment et le fuient” ‘the finite between the two infinities that enclose and escape him.’³² In contrast to the two infinities man observes, man surfaces as limited, distinguished by a finitude that is beyond his command and in the light

³¹ See Kiki Smith’s *Void of Course* (1983), an acrylic painting of a ribcage with the text “void of course,” which is an astrological term to refer to the moment of the month in which the moon stands in between two astrological signs (in between interactions with a planet).

³² *Fragment* 185 (Paris: Folio Gallimard, 2004).

of which the direction of his passing life is uncertain. In his writing, Pascal wants to make this sensation appear for the reader:

Je veux lui faire voir là-dedans un abîme nouveau. Je lui veux peindre non seulement l'univers visible, mais l'immensité qu'on peut concevoir de la nature dans l'enceinte de ce raccourci d'atôme; qu'il y voie une infinité d'univers... qu'il se perde dans ces merveilles aussi étonnantes dans leur petitesse que les autres par leur étendue.

I want to make him see therein a new abyss. I want to paint for him not only the visible universe, but the immensity of nature that can be conceived in the shelter of this foreshortened atom; so that he sees there an infinity of universe... so that he may lose himself in these wonders as shocking in their smallness as the others in their extension.

Pascal's writing is charged with visual intensity, and it is attentive to the relation to a reader and viewer this leftover written trace can produce. "qu'il se perde dans ces merveilles étonnantes" 'that he may lose himself in these shocking wonders,' is what he hopes for, instead of hoping that he exists where he is at home, safe, unsurprised, for it is only in losing himself in between these incommensurably large and small perspectives, in losing sight of his world while exploring the invisible infinities, that the miraculousness of his finite embodiment can surge forth:

car qui n'admira que notre corps, qui tantôt n'était pas perceptible dans l'univers imperceptible lui-même dans le sein du tout, soit à présent un colosse, un monde ou plutôt un tout à l'égard du néant où l'on ne peut arriver? Qui se considérera de la sorte s'effraiera de soi-même et, se considérant soutenu dans la masse que la nature lui a donnée entre ces deux abîmes de l'infini et du néant, il tremblera dans la vue de ces merveilles, et je crois que, sa curiosité se changeant en admiration, il sera plus disposé à les contempler en silence qu'à les rechercher avec présomption.

for who will not admire the fact that our body, which a little while ago was imperceptible in the universe, itself imperceptible in the bosom of a whole, is now a colossus, a world, or rather, a whole in relation to the nothingness which we cannot reach? He who regards himself in this light will be afraid of himself, and observing himself sustained in the body given him by nature between those two abysses of the Infinite and Nothing, will tremble at the sight of these marvels; and I think that, as his curiosity changes into admiration, he will be more disposed to contemplate them in silence than to examine them with presumption.

Admiration and silent contemplation of this "masse... entre ces deux abîmes" 'mass between these two abysses' that is a body, emerges when it sees itself and feels itself "tremble" at the

threshold of visible and invisible, all and nothing, life and death that is his body, on which his life is sustained against the two abysses. Such an attitude is the aesthetic one according to Smith and Bourgeois, the kind of viewing and reading that the work of art triggers in engaging his/her body intimately, making it lose its stability so that an unseen perspective may surface. The two artists' work thinks an aesthetic relation where bodies unfold to become at once admiring viewers and marvelous phenomena. Recall Smith's *The Cells—The Moon*: bodies from the infinitely small and the infinitely large spheres meet, rattling, trembling "inside her," and are presented on the wall surface for the eye to behold. To Pascal's reflection on embodiment between two abysses the feminine inflection is added in this piece. If the feminine, as previously proposed in considering *Train* (Figure 32), has to do with overflow, a beyond of meaning that cannot possibly be integrated, then the feminine position brings the viewer up close to this "contempler en silence" 'contemplating in silence' that Pascal suggests. But his definition of man as the finite "entre deux infinis qui l'enferment et le fuient" 'in between two infinities that enclose and escape him,' evokes a closed body cut against these two infinities, whereas the body in between the cells and the moon is cut through, inhabited, open. This finite body hosts something else, an excess "inside her."

Preserving Finitude

In the light of finitude, containers, a central component of the works this chapter has examined, poeticize definitely limited temporality, and their display proposes that the viewer admire life from such a perspective that intimately concerns him/her. This poetics is most literal in another piece by Kiki Smith's, *Game Time* (1986) (Figure 33), the pint-sized glass jars that compose it—twelve of them again, as in twelve months of the year, so in a measure of human

time—are filled with blood and accompanied by the statement: “There are approx. 12 pints of blood in the human body.”



32. Kiki Smith, *Game Time* (1986; no longer extant). Glass, blood, and silicone. © 1998 Kiki Smith

As container, each individual body, whose exiting residues pour into the world or into other containers that isolate them, has limited capacity, and a limited life capacity as well. The gesture of collecting and presenting the totality of the exemplary vital fluid in this piece in jars with lids, evokes the preservation in time of perishing edible goods by putting them in jars, as in making *preserves* from ripe fruit. The work makes a resistant gesture against the abyss that delimits embodied life, while it still marks the limited amount of life in a body; and by presenting it in jars usually used for food, the erotic dimension of human life, and the surplus of this dimension, beyond the sphere of survival or of what is necessary, are also underscored.

But the poetics of finitude containers present might also highlight, in addition to the notion of limited capacity, the indefinite and incalculable character of an individual life's limit. The growing installation *What will become of me*, (1985-), by contemporary artist Adrien Piper, is a work that thinks this problem and will prompt one more look at Smith's carboys:



Figure 33. Adrien Piper, *What Will Become of Me* (1985-). Hair, fingernails, skin, jars, shelf and typed text on paper 16 x 69-1/2 x 6", installed, Collections of Peter Norton and Eileen Harris Norton.

In a growing collection of clear honey jars (iconographically related to Smith's jars for preserves) Piper started storing her hair and fingernails in 1985, and made a written promise to continue this process until she dies, when a jar with her ashes will complete the piece. Like many Baroque paintings, Piper's piece features a *vanitas*; and like the anamorphosis in Holbein's *Ambassadors* (1533) (which is an amorphous blob of paint at the foot of the ambassadors unless the viewer stands at a particular angle in relation to the painting, where the emblematic skull surges forth), to cite a famous example, it calls the eye to a particular perspective—in this case a temporal one, rather than spatial. Strikingly, Piper's work will only be fully visible to the viewer once she is cremated and therefore no longer can see for herself. The jars filled with dark disintegrating hair and nails, which are also instances of the body's waste, quite literally and constantly observe the admonition in Genesis 3:19 "Remember, man, you are dust, and to dust you will return." Organic residues compose a work that slowly, indefinitely grows and inscribes itself in time as Piper's body gradually disintegrates. Smith's rows of twelve carboys or books of hours present both limited capacity, as in Smith's blood-pint jars, and the indefinite amount of

time and life content, as Piper's hair and nail-filled honey jars underscore. While each carboy in Smith's *Untitled* books of hours has a determined capacity, a predetermined and distinct function, and the piece features twelve instead of a growing collection, they remain unfilled. The number of cycles of twelve months that a body can go through is indefinite. Unlike the two installations this chapter has just shown, the carboys' narrow necks are open, they have no lids: emptiness passes through them.

The carboys are medieval books of hours and baroque mirrors, but the conceptual relevance of a historical layer contemporary to their making (the 1980s) remains to be considered: compartmentalizing secretions into different containers, *Untitled* evokes their antiseptic function, as in a medical laboratory, so at the insistence of themes of health, decay, and mortality, one cannot neglect the allusion to a pandemic as highly contagious, human life-threatening as is AIDS, discovered around the time these pieces were created by Smith, who was very sensitive to this issue.³³ As anyone should know today, its virus is transmitted—exactly, tragically—via body fluids, which can traverse different bodies during some key life-infusing operations: sexual contact, breast-feeding, blood transfusions. Revitalizing and destructive powers are passed on in the same, ambivalent process that interrupts the organism's isolation, that self-preserving measure of the body-cell.

Within the scientific paradigm, the murderous nature of this virus casts light on the body in a position of extreme vulnerability to the infinitely small that the work asks one to contemplate and silently admire, following Pascal. Viruses' bodies are so small that they cannot be seen through a magnifying glass; even the most powerful microscopes today cannot make most viruses visible. Incalculable temporality and fragility, in other words, the stuff bodies' life

³³ Her early production dealt centrally with the organism, and she explains that it was her sister dying of AIDS that gave rise to it. See Frankel.

is made of, is not just a romantic idea. The reality of the Other, of the Thing dwelling within and expropriating a body I think is mine takes actual form through this viral reference. How is it relevant to the work of art here? First, it is a model to think ambivalence, which the beginning of this chapter introduced through the spider figure in *Bourgeois* by showing that ambivalence upsets the principle of non-contradiction, and the rejection of the other, on which self-agency relies. Ambivalence is the unstable, “trembling” site to quote Pascal once more, where life and death, Eros and Thanatos, are dealt. Second, the viral model allows thinking the interaction with the work of art as an encounter where, through a particular transfusion, something foreign invades the space supposed to be private property, and overwrites the organism’s code. A virus is not an organism, and it needs a host-cell in order to live and reproduce, at the expense of the cell’s normal functioning. Analogously, one might say that sensations need a body to exist, and can only do so at the cost of the law of the coherent organism. As mentioned previously in reference to the label on *Bourgeois*’ cell, this is the kind of “sanity” art guarantees: the sanity of sculpting a body of immanent desire.

If the AIDS context coexists in this piece with the Christian medieval one, it is because the latter is centered on a notion of vulnerable flesh and divine, carnal participation. Reading and praying only have the previously-discussed alimentary relevance in the light of Jesus Christ’s incarnation—also articulated as the divine Word’s becoming human flesh (John 1:14)—and particularly of a communion ritual based on the Passion, understood as a redemptive sacrifice of the messiah’s body. In this tradition, communion, a miraculous connection of worldly and divine realms, involves individually ingesting the flesh and blood of Christ, to which individual books of hours are analogous insofar as they allow each devout to savor bits of the Holy Scriptures. Eating and drinking Christ’s Word, flesh, and blood is characterized as a sweet, delightful, and

even erotic experience;³⁴ at the same time, they are consumed for their nourishing and healing effects.³⁵ But if Communion overwrites the flesh by healing it from its impurity and redeeming it from the perishable world, the virus introduces death into the body. Smith's book of hours, a work of art, is not there to save the reader's body in the Christian sense; in allowing the viewer to look into the empty containers, the transparent collection *Untitled* (1986) (Figure 29), particularly when revisited after the mirrored version *Untitled* (1987-90) (Figure 30), renders the void.

The transfusions that art gets reading and writing involved in, through unique webs of signifiers, transmit sensations—sensations of life, finitude, preciousness, extimacy, immanent desire, and others, as this chapter has shown. To transmit, then, sensations that alter the self-preservation and survival-gearred order of the organism, the work first reveals a body's membranous condition, its susceptibility to this intrusion. This is what the analyses of Bourgeois' *Precious liquids* cell and of Smith's two *Untitled* carboy rows have shown. Finally, if the connotations of the AIDS virus contribute to the meditation on finitude proposed by the latter pieces by Smith, it is because they insist upon the sexualized dimension of the body in an intimate relation to death.³⁶ In Smith's two rows of carboys, as in the water tank of Bourgeois'

³⁴ See for example Bernard de Clairvaux' sermons on the *Song of Songs*, where he reads Salomon's text on the nuptial encounter between bride and groom interpreted as the love between the Church and God or the soul and Christ. This relation is illuminated in terms of phrases such as "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his lips" "Your breasts are better than wine, smelling sweet of the best ointments."

³⁵ See Sermon 32, Op. Cit.

³⁶ Georges Bataille addresses the bond between death and sexuality in *L'érotisme*, where he presents the case of cell division for the purposes of reproduction, to claim that what happens is not the immortalization of each cell but instead an irreparable division. He defines eroticism as human: "La seule modification de la discontinuité individuelle dont l'animal est susceptible est la mort. ... Dans la vie humaine, au contraire, la violence sexuelle ouvre une plaie. Rarement la plaie se referme d'elle-même..." 'The only modification of individual discontinuity possible for the animal is death. ... In human life, on the other hand, sexual violence causes a wound that rarely heals of its own accord...' Yet if voluptuousness is the human distinctive trait in this account, for Bataille the distinction between animal and human dissolves by the wound voluptuousness inflicts: "L'être en vérité se divise, son unité se rompt, dès le premier instant de la crise sexuelle. A ce moment, la vie pléthorique de la chair se heurte à la résistance de l'esprit. Même l'accord apparent ne suffit pas: la convulsion de la chair, au-delà du consentement, demande le silence, elle demande l'absence de l'esprit. Le mouvement charnel est singulièrement étranger à la vie

Precious liquids, the containers are left open. With their open narrow necks, the twelve carboys convey uteri; emptied monthly of their precious liquid, they give the threshold, and (dis)individuation, a feminine shape and temporality.

humaine: il se déchaîne en dehors d'elle, à la condition qu'elle se taise, à la condition qu'elle s'absente." 'the individual is split up and his unity is shattered from the first instant of the sexual crisis. Here, the plethoric life of the flesh escapes the resistance of the spirit. Even the apparent consent does not suffice: the convulsion of the flesh, beyond consent, demands silence, it demands the absence of the spirit. The movement of the flesh is particularly alien to human life: it develops outside it, on the condition of its silence, of its absence.' Bataille *OC X* (105-6). *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (104-5).

CHAPTER FOUR

In Search of a New Telephone: Ethical Aesthetics in *Douleur exquise*

“Car aux troubles de la mémoire sont liées les intermittences du coeur.”
Marcel Proust

“Comme Montaigne et La Boétie se téléphonaient, sans quoi ils n’auraient atteint si absolument et simultanément le sein des seins, et tous ces noeuds et liens, qui plus tard furent désignés par les vocables commençant par co-, n’auraient jamais existé.”
Hélène Cixous, *Hyperrêve*

In “Death Drive in Venice: Sophie Calle as Guide to the Future Cities,” Juliet Flower

MacCannell reads Venice, the location in which contemporary French writer and photographer Sophie Calle’s 1980 piece *Suite vénitienne* develops, as a site from which to imagine other, new forms of interaction and circulation of desire.¹

What MacCannell’s reading notices in Venice’s urban design is its unavoidable threat, as a liquid force overflowing the landmarks of civilization, but also the opportunity it offers, to deviate from “normal” channels of communication and reinvent the city. Venice presents the figure of liquidity we have found to be specific to the work of art in the previous chapters: a creative force disrupting language, thought, and common sense, consequently disheveling a social fabric in which speaking beings function and interact. Because the city suffers regular flooding, and because its layout is such that any other modern city’s vehicles prove inconvenient, MacCannell considers that “Venice audaciously deprives you of the illusion that you (and by analogy) your civilization have drive under control.”²

¹ In Venice, for instance, she follows and photographs a Frenchman without his knowledge, which forces her to disguise herself as an attractive blonde foreigner, sparking in the local people a novel friendliness toward her and a set of fantasies to account for her behavior.

² (a): *The Journal of Culture and the Unconscious* 11:1 (2002): 63. As explained in chapter two of this dissertation through Marguerite Duras’ novel *L’amour*, Lacan’s reading of Freud proposes that the death drive assails subjects insofar as it operates according to excess, to a beyond of the pleasure principle or of instinctual satisfaction in the interest of survival. The death drive derails from this ground of homeostasis, bringing about another logic, which from the standpoint of survival appears as dysfunctional, destructive behavior. The subject of drive is thus marked

To MacCannell “watery Venice” reveals a powerful, deviant function within Calle’s *Suite*; in what way might this watery function describe, beyond the *Suite* piece, Calle’s concept of the work of art, and its visual, spatial staging? Insistently organized as narratives, sequences, paths, journeys to follow,³ Calle’s installation projects set up sequences of photographs and texts as trajectories for the viewer and reader to follow, walking along according to the installation’s constraints (a particular pace, direction, and even bodily disposition) that will lead this viewer and reader adrift. Insofar as city planning conditions, charts beforehand, the dwellers’ possible routes and encounters, it regulates desire. The very strategy used in city planning to keep dwellers from losing themselves, Calle’s work applies in installations whose research opens onto a beyond of meaning.

Not only in Venice, but on a canal called *Douleur exquise* (1985-2003) too, then, Sophie (as subject of the enounced)⁴ and the reader (as the one who traverses the lines of a verbal/visual/spatial text) drift away from safe, solid ground. First of all, time’s order is derailed by a singular moment of pain that gives the piece its title, since it is exactly the work’s origin. As the first-person narrator repeatedly admits, this pain appears within “une histoire ordinaire” ‘an ordinary story’: Sophie starts seeing a man she had always wanted and this coincides with her being offered a grant to do an art project abroad. So she goes to Japan for three months,

by deadly repetition as its own goal (jouissance), not by an external goal that would satisfy this subject’s urge. In terms of civilization or the social contract, “putting drive under control” finds its prime example in Freud’s patriarchal myth of the Father of the horde, the one male for whom enjoyment is unrestricted, whose assassination by his sons introduces the prohibition of incest so as to maintain equality among the brothers, but above all, to prevent them from killing each other. Subjects divert the desire for un-castrated enjoyment, to derive enjoyment from abiding by the law. MacCannell’s point of departure, however, is a post-World War II sense that this ordering of civilization has failed, and that such reshaping of symbolic space calls for a feminine logic, that of the ~~Woman~~ who doesn’t exist. ~~Woman~~’s distinctive trait is that she is not-all subject to the phallic signifier that sustains the symbolic order. See the formulas of sexuation in Jacques Lacan, *Encore. Le séminaire Livre XX* (Paris: Seuil, 1975) 99.

³ Martine Delvaux emphasizes the movement of “filature” ‘tailing’ in Calle’s work, and vaguely suggests its connection to “quelque chose qui est de l’ordre du sexuel.” “Sophie Calle: No Sex” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* (Vol. 10, No. 4, December 2006 pp. 425-435).

⁴ This chapter will henceforth refer to the main character of *Douleur Exquise*’s narrative as Sophie, and Calle will refer to the author of the piece.

disregarding her lover's threat to forget her. Their relationship continues while she is away and he plans for them to meet in New Delhi at the end of her trip. When she arrives at the airport he is not there, and in the hotel room she reaches him by phone, to learn he is leaving her for another woman. To a large extent the work consists then in narrating lived time as altered by this experience, whose impact is such that, despite its banality, no simple recounting can communicate it. Aesthetic recourses are indispensable in order to transmit that unhinged sense of time and a strange knowledge about the limits of language that this pain can give access to. In an earlier project, Calle went so far as to mail her own bed to a stranger (*Les dormeurs*, 1980), and even in a very recent piece (*Prenez soin de vous*, 2007), she sends a breakup letter to 107 women to interpret it. Her work asks viewers and readers to walk in the protagonist's shoes, or rather, to sleep in her bed. Photographs, specific words, spatial setups that reconstruct time and space are necessary to show how an event of pain transforms, for whoever endures it, their relationship to and reading of reality. In a comparative reading, this chapter suggests that Marcel Proust's vividly detailed articulation of this effect of pain in "Les intermittences du coeur," in a scene where a past loss becomes real by an act of memory, describes the logic of viewing, reading, and thinking pain that *Douleur exquise* calls for. Finally, Calle's wager is that this knowledge—to be considered here via Jacques Lacan's proposition "there is no sexual relation"—founds another creation: of the piece in its aesthetic singularity, certainly, but more crucially of a new approach to the other, which gives the work of art, concerned with the problem of desire, an ethical dimension.

Douleur exquise renews the traditionally pictorial form of the triptych: its first and third panels each comprise a sequence of framed photographs and texts, while the central one they

flank consists of an installation.⁵ As in many instances of triptych paintings (where Christian imagery is historically predominant), “douleur” ‘pain’ occupies the central panel in Calle’s piece. Its viewer, who through the first section has been scanning a museum wall for photos featuring a daily countdown, is expected to walk from the public museum space directly into a quiet, vacant bedroom.⁶ This installation, titled *Douleur*, forms the triptych’s core, placing its two flanking wings as this core’s before and after as is also usual in triptychs narrating biblical scenes where a transformation occurs, which explains their respective titles *Avant la douleur* and *Après la douleur*. Such titles indicate a specific temporal sequence once lived by Sophie, narrated in this piece—a personal diary of sorts—through text, image, and space. Yet all at once, the temporality at stake is that of the reader/viewer/visitor, and even that of the work of art. Of course the potential effect produced in the viewer by a work of art whose theme is pain should be quite different from a pain experienced within the plot of one’s personal life. But the need to say so is indicative of an intentionally tenuous line Calle draws between art and life, public and private.⁷

⁵ The same piece is published in book format, but while it collects the three moments on the page, the singularity of the spatial experience does not translate well in the book version. Citations are from Sophie Calle, *Douleur Exquise* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2003). Unless otherwise noted, English translations are from *Exquisite Pain*, trans. Charles Penwarden (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005). The version of the piece this chapter will be thinking of was presented in 2003 at the Centre Georges Pompidou, in Sophie Calle’s retrospective exhibit *M’as-tu vue*, curated by Christine Macel. Until now, the installation has only been displayed in temporary exhibitions, in its French and English versions. This said, this chapter does not overlook the piece’s literary dimension; rather, it turns to the specificity of the spatial and visual as narrative techniques. Transpositions between the book and museum installation formats recur in Calle’s work; perhaps to a certain extent because the materiality of the book is compatible with the narrative, sequential structures her projects present. Critics have also noted the literariness of her prose and reconstruction of personal experiences. In analyzing an example of Calle’s textual strategy, Robert Storr writes: “The tone of this mini-tale is artfully matter-of-fact; the recourse to the literary, passé simple, is also artful, as is the particular locution—“je me permis”—in which it is used.” “The Woman Who Wasn’t There,” *Art Press* 295 (2003): 23. And Shirley Ann Jordan notes the “exercices de style” that emerge through the variations on the same tale in “Exhibiting Pain: Sophie Calle’s *Douleur Exquise*,” *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* 61.2 (2007): 206.

⁶ By shifting between two and three dimensions in the passage from photography to installation art and back to flat images, Calle’s triptych also emphasizes the sense of interiority and privacy that typically corresponds to the central panel, guarded by the hinging wing panels that enable shutting the pain(ing) away from view.

⁷ The French literary tradition tirelessly returns to explore these dichotomies; some famous examples close to Calle’s approach are Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Stendhal’s *Vie de Henry Brulard*, Baudelaire’s *Journal intime*, Proust’s masterpiece, some of Colette’s narratives, Breton’s *Nadja*, and Péro’s oeuvre. For a comparison with Péro see Olivier Rolin, in *M’as-tu vue* (Paris: Centre Pompidou Editions Xavier Barral, 2003) 137-40. It is well known

Sophie Calle's oeuvre interrogates the social order's structuring logic by turning Sophie's own, personal experiences in different roles and situations into the basic element in each work of art. Her signature strategy of making the plot of her own life into a work of art interrogates, first of all, each one of its notions: the notion of individual life as having a narrative structure, this life as a personal possession that is nonetheless never fully present to its owner, and certainly the work of art as concept. Calle's pieces, directly biographical in content, submit the productive field, domain, or form of agency called art, to the singularity of her everyday experience. Moreover, Calle's work implies that telling her story/creating the piece can have real, transformative effects; that it puts to work something that remains unavailable on the sole level of personal experience. Its narrative articulation is thus as necessary as a reader/viewer/visitor, who in experiencing the work can endorse it.

What the triptych delimits, then, is a stretch of passing time marked by and articulated as a process through *pain*, whose first-person narrative is reiterated and complicated by each viewer's own procession through the work. This happens to the extent that a viewer, discovering the piece in a different time, enters into the temporality the *Douleur exquise* narrative commemorates—in a function similar to a believer's real access to the moment of Jesus' Last Supper in the Eucharist celebration,⁸ for instance, or of the fourteen Stations of the Cross, the *Via Dolorosa*, in walking along to contemplate their depictions. The pain at stake in Calle's piece is

that Marcel Duchamp's groundbreaking *Ready-mades* function according to this very principle of transgression between realms. Calle's art follows in this tradition to the extent that photographs of ordinary objects and her own everyday life enter the gallery for display. However, her action's aim is not just to interrogate the institution and concept of art. In fact, neither is Duchamp's. In Calle's oeuvre it is a problem of desire. For a reading of desire in Duchamp see Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1993) and "The Im/pulse to See" in Hal Foster (ed.) *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Dia Art Foundation/Bay Press, 1988).

⁸ The "real" status of the moments of Jesus' life commemorated in Eucharist celebration was a major object of disagreement between the Roman Catholic church and Protestantism in sixteenth-century Europe. In the same way, the reality of holy images for devotees was at the center of the Byzantine debates that gave rise to the iconoclast movement in the eighth century. See Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, icône, économie: les sources byzantines de l'imaginaire contemporain*.

characterized as *exquise* ‘exquisite,’ recalling the Surrealist parlor game *cadavre exquis*, where a text or image are collectively assembled by each player introducing a fragment. In the image version of the game, the body is typically divided into three sections—head, torso and upper extremities, and legs. Calle’s piece includes processual features from this Surrealist variation on the triptych form, developed among several participants who are unable to see what the others have previously been inscribed or drawn: in *Douleur exquisite* the viewer, as a participant in the work, is unable to contemplate the piece all at once, having to enter into its space in order to discover it. Also, the condition of collective creation is crucial, since the piece requires the viewer to continue the work by literally going through the narrated temporal process of pain, and the composition of the third section of the triptych combines Sophie’s story with a sequence of pain narratives by several other characters. The piece opens with a dictionary definition of *douleur exquisite* (including the abbreviation “(med.)” to specify it as a medical term). What is at stake in thinking the work of art through a “douleur vive et nettement localisée” ‘acutely felt, pinpoint suffering’⁹?

Bed Memories

⁹ This is the definition for the medical term “douleur exquisite,” provided as epigraph in both the book and installation forms. The English translation is the one provided in the book.



Figure 34. Sophie Calle, *Douleur exquise* (*Douleur* installation) <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/strombe/5113975360/>>¹⁰

In a vacant bedroom lies a pair of single beds made with white sheets, and on one of them, close to the pillow, a blood-red analog telephone. On the forty-eighth day after her night in this bedroom, marked as one of the daily text-image fragments set up in the third panel of the piece (*Après la douleur*), the narrator writes:

J'ai passé le reste de la nuit—dans ce décor minable, la moquette grise mangée aux mites, les deux lits jumeaux recouverts d'une couvrelit à motifs bleus—le regard stupidement fixé sur le telephone. Il était rouge vif. Au petit matin je l'ai photographié. (246)

I spent the rest of the night in that shabby room—gray moth-eaten carpet, twin beds with blue-patterned bedspreads—gazing stupidly at the telephone. It was bright red. In the early morning I photographed it.

Throughout *Après la douleur*, the piece's third section, a fragment of the scene appears *ad nauseam* on the upper left-hand side of each day's composition:

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, the images that follow in this chapter were provided by the Paula Cooper Gallery, from their exhibit of the English version of Calle's piece.



Figure 35. *Après la douleur* (installation view). Paula Cooper Gallery, NY.

In presenting so many photographs and textual descriptions, this hotel room, like the objects in it (the moldy carpet; the other twin bed, outside the photograph's frame), loses the neutrality that allows innumerable guests to occupy the same intimate space. While the experiences guests have this kind of space may be unforgettable, hotel rooms themselves function like slates that always go completely blank again for new guests to come write a bit of their lives here, then leave it behind themselves without a thought. Any trace, the guests expect, will surely be erased before the next dweller's arrival. But this effect fails in *Douleur exquise*, from the end of the phone call on, when the narrator starts to record details about the room: "J'ai raccroché. Je suis restée des heures, assise sur le lit, à fixer le téléphone et la moquette moisie de la chambre 261 de l'hôtel Impérial." (206) 'I hung up. I spent hours, sitting on the bed, staring at the telephone and the moldy carpet in room 261 of the Imperial Hotel.' Exposed to these stimuli in a moment of intense pain, her memory permanently absorbs them.¹¹ The moldy carpet and the telephone keep

¹¹ One is reminded of Sigmund Freud's mystic writing pad as the model for memory mechanisms. See "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'" (1925). The condition for new memories to be processed lies in the erasure of

returning in the narrator's tale as the days come and chronologically remove her from the painful scene nonetheless firmly impressed in her mind. And, since she documented the scene where instead of the man she loved *pain* made an entrance, the photograph becomes the indelible heading to each diary entry, which consists in rehearsing the end of that love relationship. The installation features rectangular surfaces of dark linen as the pages of these daily narratives; words are woven into the linen with white thread, instead of penned or printed, in a gesture that recalls Homer's Penelope and a writing process that illustrates "acute, localized pain" through the needle's slow, fine piercing of the smooth fabric. The series progresses up to day ninety-nine after the rupture; its length and the contrast between threaded words and fabric gradually diminish, until only the linen page's black surface is left, without any words to read. The night at the New Delhi hotel and the subsequent writing process took place in January 1985. But the sharing of this incident as a story and in this particular writing wait almost two decades. *Douleur exquise* was displayed in Sophie Calle's retrospective *M'as-tu vue*, at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris, in 2003. The framed collection of diary entries in narrow, vertical rectangles forming *Après la douleur* is each paired with a different story on the right-hand side, from another collection she developed in parallel, made up of other peoples' most painful memories. For symmetry, Calle supplied a different photograph to head each of the others' narratives in the guise of corresponding visual memories. This other side of the *Après la douleur* sequence will be discussed further on.

immediate perceptions, in the way the surface of the mystic writing-pad can be cleared to receive new notes. Three layers compose this device, and the first is compared to a shield, preventing stimuli (as a kind of writing on the psychic apparatus) from permanently harming the layer below it, which would ruin the slate's ability to go blank again. All of the writing, however, remains in the deepest strata (the unconscious) and is "legible in suitable lights." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953-74)19: 227-32.

For now the effect of pain over the experiences of time and the material components in *Douleur exquise* will be analyzed by turning to a specific moment in a masterpiece strongly informing Calle's project: Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Already relevant insofar as both authors' projects assign a major role to the unfolding of time and memory, and insofar as the narrators take their reader on a journey through their life experiences that assigns this reader the role of deciphering an enigma, the connection to Proust's novel is traceable through shared prominent signifiers, such as "bed." It is introduced as early as the first scene in *Du côté de chez Swann*, which opens with: "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure." 'For a long time, I would go to bed early.'¹² Any reader knows Proust's beds host a wealth of phenomenal experiences. As for Sophie Calle, the bed resurfaces in her oeuvre time and again in different contexts and functions: a healing support for strangers when she lends her bed to them in *Les dormeurs* (1979), the index of failed sexual encounters in her film with Gregory Shepard, *Double Blind AKA No Sex Last Night* (1992), and the repository for Calle's dying mother, whose last breath her camera recorder tries in vain to capture, in *Pas pu saisir la mort* (2007) are some striking examples.¹³ From empty beds, to beds with strangers, to the death bed, Calle's work presents this signifier in a discomfoting way, as for her, it constitutes an object of research, *recherche*, as in Proust's novel's title, on the (non-) relation to the unknown other, a problem this chapter seeks to addresses.

¹² *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954) 1: 12. Unless otherwise noted English translations are from *Swann's Way*, Trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Viking, 2003), and *Sodom and Gomorrah*, Trans. John Sturrock (New York: Viking, 2004).

¹³ This piece was created by Calle with Venice in mind, since she had been invited to represent the French Pavilion in the city's 2007 Biennale when her mother was declared terminally ill. Calle promised her mother that she would be present at the show. Calle presented a video recording of her mother's last thirteen minutes alive in her deathbed, accompanied by a Mozart Clarinet Concerto, and written final preparations made by Calle with her mother, an oil portrait of the mother, and some photographs. Her intention was to see her mother's last breath either with her own eyes or through the camera, but neither method succeeds.

Although when one steps into the bedroom installation of *Douleur exquise* one does not yet know the whole story of the rupture between Sophie and her lover, the first section of the piece has made clear that the daily countdown is supposed to lead Sophie to reencountering her lover after a three-month separation due to her using an artist's travel grant in Japan. One knows, like Sophie at that point in time, that they were to meet in New Delhi where he has reserved a hotel room, and one has read the disappointing note on Japan Air Lines stationery that she received on the day of her flight to that city:

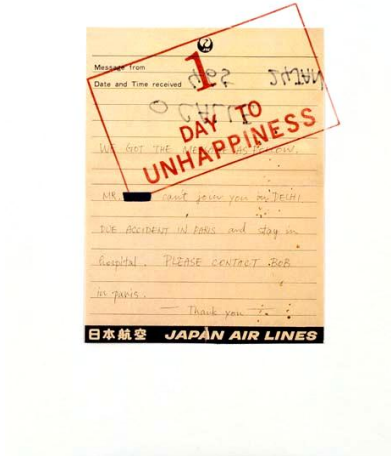


Figure 36. (DOULEUR J – 1 Airline message to Sophie)

“M[redacted] can’t join you in DELHI DUE ACCIDENT IN PARIS and stay in hospital. PLEASE CONTACT Bob in Paris. – Thank you –” (sic).¹⁴ The few days preceding the one represented by this note have built the excitement of the coming date of the lovers’ encounter, and so, after this

¹⁴ The accident and visit to the hospital are completely irrelevant to why the man does not meet Sophie in New Delhi, as she learns during their brief telephone conversation. He had a whitlow on one of his fingers and stopped by at the hospital for ten minutes to have it cured. He manipulates this information to intensify the message’s drama and make a fool of Sophie. The pettiness of the excuse for his absence and the disposable nature of the pain this whitlow could have caused him are dramatically staged against a pain that lingers and from which a large work of art is set forth almost twenty years after the facts.

deflating message, one enters the installation room and is faced with the made-up single bed as the index of a missed encounter, an image of pain.

Pain in *Douleur exquise* does away with the hotel bed's irrelevance, allowing it to resurface beyond the present where the protagonist encountered it. This is why Calle turns the image of the bed and red telephone into the letterhead for three months of diary entries following the night of rupture in New Delhi, and why it is not enough for the viewer to see this photographic repetition, why s/he must enter the scene spatially. Actual entry into the room's replica places the viewer in the position of the protagonist of the narrated experience more forcefully than its sole photographic reproduction can. And the installation's introduction of an abrupt loss of spatiotemporal boundaries between reader and tale accurately conveys to this reader a sensorial breakdown in the order of time and meaning, which the following turn to Proust develops.

In this respect *Douleur exquise* echoes a scene at the Balbec Grand-Hôtel in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*: the protagonist returns to this vacation site from his childhood as a young adult and, sitting on the bedside leaning forward to untie his boots, a memory of his now dead grandmother arises and invades the present, shaking him to tears. The first-person narrator's formula for this experience is "Bouleversement de toute ma personne." (2: 755) 'An upturning of my entire self.'¹⁵ Bending over to untie his boots on the first night at this hotel, that is, turning his head upside down toward his feet, causes the image of his grandmother performing exactly the same operation for him years earlier to surface, as though dislodged from its silent, dry corner of his

¹⁵ John Sturrock's translation of this sentence is "A convulsion of my entire being" (154). I propose "upturning" here in order to preserve the proximity of this mental experience to the physical turn upside down within which it occurs. "Self" for "personne" is more convenient to this chapter's argument on the work of art, which entails the breakdown of the self.

mind by the head inversion he had tried to control so as to prevent a “crise de fatigue cardiaque” ‘attack of cardiac fatigue.’”

Mais à peine eus-je touché le premier bouton de ma bottine, ma poitrine s’enfla, remplie d’une présence inconnue, divine, des sanglots me secouèrent, des larmes ruisselèrent de mes yeux. L’être qui venait à mon secours, qui me sauvait de la sécheresse de l’âme, c’était celui qui, plusieurs années auparavant, dans un moment de détresse et de solitude identiques, dans un moment où je n’avais plus rien de moi, était entré, et qui m’avait rendu à moi-même... je venais d’apercevoir, dans ma mémoire, penché sur ma fatigue... le visage de ma grand-mère véritable dont... je retrouvais dans un souvenir involontaire et complet la réalité vivante. (755-6)

But hardly had I touched the first button of my ankle boot when my chest swelled, filled with an unknown, divine presence, I was shaken by sobs, tears streamed from my eyes. The person who had come to my assistance, who was rescuing me from my aridity of soul, was the one who, several years before, at an identical moment of distress and loneliness, a moment when I no longer had anything of myself, had entered, and who had restored me to myself... I had just glimpsed, in my memory, bent over my fatigue... the face of my true grandmother, the living reality of whom... I had rediscovered in a complete and involuntary memory. (154)

The memory thus surges forth for him like an unexpected “divine presence,” felt as an overflowing, drenching force. It is interesting to note that while the content of the memory concerns a character familiar to the protagonist, the narrator describes her reappearance in terms of an *unknown*, divine presence. Also, he simultaneously describes her role towards him as restorative (“m’avait rendu à moi-même”) and shaking, disturbing (“des sanglots me secouèrent...”). It is through such a short-circuit that recovering “the living reality” of his grandmother’s face all at once confronts him with the irreversible reality of her death:

ce n’était qu’à l’instant—plus d’une année après son enterrement, à cause de cet anachronisme qui empêche si souvent le calendrier des faits de coïncider avec celui des sentiments—que je venais d’apprendre qu’elle était morte. (756)

it was only at this instant—more than a year after her funeral, on account of the anachronism which so often prevents the calendar of facts from coinciding with that of our feelings—that I had just learned she was dead. (155)

This realization does not arrive as a piece of news from external sources. Rather, its strictly subjective character produces a true “bouleversement,” an upturning of the protagonist’s entire “personne,” his “entire self.”¹⁶ Proust’s protagonist simultaneously experiences a vision (of his grandmother’s face, of what he calls “me”) and a loss through a violent intervention of a portion of the past into the present that wounds time’s supposed continuity and the correlative, imaginary linearity in which the self’s experience unfolds. And according to the narrator this seamless linearity holds only for the “calendar of facts,” that is, as long as the “calendar of feelings” does not interfere.

Interference between unsynchronized calendars inaugurates “les intermittences du coeur”¹⁷ ‘the intermittences of the heart’: reality becomes strange. As a Proustian work, *Douleur Exquise* puts this strangeness into play; for instance, it is not clear that the New Delhi hotel room the viewer enters is merely a replica of the one Sophie entered in 1985. Perhaps this relation is inverted and it is the room in that Indian city that becomes the mere copy of a real, materialized pain. On “la réalité vivante” ‘the living reality’ the narrator of the *Recherche* comments:

Cette réalité n’existe pas pour nous tant qu’elle n’a pas été recréée par notre pensée (sans cela les hommes qui ont été mêlés à un combat gigantesque seraient tous de grands poètes épiques)... (756)

This reality does not exist for us until such time as it has been re-created in our minds (otherwise, the men who have been involved in some titanic battle would all be great epic poets)... (155)

Quite like Proust’s narrator, Sophie’s engaging and estranging of a reader’s own time-space is key to *Douleur exquise*’s recreation project of animating this ‘living reality.’ Inside *Douleur* not only does one witness a collision of usually non-contiguous spaces (the museum and the

¹⁶ When preceded by a possessive pronoun the French word *personne* is also used to designate the self, that which constitutes individuality. (‘personne,’ subst. fém. B. 1. in *Trésor de la langue française*.)

¹⁷ This is the subtitle for the section of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* in which the Balbec scene in question unfolds.

bedroom, the art exhibit in the museum and the New Delhi hotel room), but also of fiction and reality, of the past in the present (for instance, with the presence of that outdated analogue telephone).¹⁸ By the same token, the viewer, physically put through the disappointing scene from Sophie's perspective, experiences a wavering of the self's boundaries; like Proust's protagonist uncannily repeating his grandmother's gesture, the viewer follows in Sophie's deceived steps. Even when the site of Sophie's rupture with her lover on the phone is not the viewer's own, the many days preceding and building toward this scene have built much tension, and by the time one reaches the site one dwells in Sophie's "sentimental calendar." To enter the installation under these conditions is almost to revisit a site of one's past. If, with Proust, the epic poem uses words to recreate the wars "dans notre pensée" 'in our minds', *Douleur exquise* recreates/thinks Sophie's pain through narrative as well as through image and space to directly target the reader's sensations.¹⁹

Another glance into the Balbec hotel can illuminate an important shift in *Douleur exquise*, regarding the senses and stimuli, which accounts for the privilege of the work of art in approaching pain's singularity. Also by way of the temporal wound, the materiality of the stage traversed by pain becomes excessively present. After untying his boots and self on the bedside, and after waking from a vivid dream of visiting his dead grandmother, Marcel has this experience:

J'avais oublié de fermer les volets et sans doute le grand jour m'avait éveillé. Mais je ne pus supporter d'avoir sous les yeux ces flots de la mer que ma grand-mère pouvait autrefois contempler pendant des heures; l'image nouvelle de leur beauté indifférente se complétait aussitôt par l'idée qu'elle ne les voyait pas; j'aurais voulu boucher mes

¹⁸ Calle's piece resembles Proust's again in the conveyance of an era gone forever, both situated at the turn of the century (20th and 21st). Both make this visible through technology and through a picture of the political atmosphere of the time they write about. In its first panel *Douleur exquise* showcases the Soviet state, not far from its end in 1984.

¹⁹ On direct transmission of sensations, informed by Gilles Deleuze's *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation*, see my Chapter 3.

oreilles à leur bruit, car maintenant la plénitude lumineuse de la plage creusait un vide dans mon cœur; tout semblait me dire comme ces allées et ces pelouses d'un jardin public où je l'avais autrefois perdue, quand j'étais tout enfant: "Nous ne l'avons pas vue", et sous la rotondité du ciel pâle et divin je me sentais oppressé comme sous une immense cloche bleuâtre fermant un horizon où ma grand-mère n'était pas. (762)

I had forgotten to close the shutters, and the broad daylight had no doubt woken me up. But I could not bear to look out on those waves that my grandmother had once been able to contemplate for hours on end; the new image of their indifferent beauty was at once completed by the idea that she could not see them; I would have liked to block my ears against their sound, for now the luminous plénitude of the beach was hollowing out a void in my heart; everything seemed to be saying to me, like the paths and the lawns in the public gardens where I had once lost her, when I was very young, "We haven't seen her," and beneath the roundness of the pale, heavenly sky I felt oppressed, as if beneath an immense blue bell jar, shutting off a horizon where my grandmother was not. (161)

"He had forgotten to close the shutters..." Forgetting had protected the protagonist's self, mended or shut the wound of his grandmother's death, until an involuntary memory crept up on him the night before, upturning the value of forgetting, thus accusing him of forgetting his grandmother (which is the issue in the dream separating the two scenes here). In this quotation's first phrase, forgetfulness operates in the protagonist's life according to the recent upturning of the self, and it makes a move against the protagonist's safety. By forgetting to close the shutters he allows sensorial stimuli to deepen this wound in time. What he did not want to see, what the shutters kept out of view, now intrudes visually, aurally, and wakes him to that unbearable pain of the sea's beauty, hereafter invisible to his grandmother. As in Calle's Venice,²⁰ the Balbec sea overflows the solid ground of common sense, from where the sea's beauty can be contemplated with indifference. Bed offers no safe harbor. Through the torrent of sensations traversing the protagonist, "hollowing out a void in his heart," he discovers that she is nowhere to be found in the full, vast, luminous world whose horizon closes without her. So to protect himself from a world speaking only her absence, he looks away:

²⁰ and also as in the sea in Thalassa in Duras' *L'amour*, and in *Césarée*, which erodes the land and brings the city to ruins. See Chapter 2.

Pour ne plus rien voir, je me tournai du côté du mur, mais hélas! Ce qui était contre moi c'était cette cloison qui servait jadis entre nous deux de messenger matinal, cette cloison qui, aussi docile qu'un violon à rendre toutes les nuances d'un sentiment, disait si exactement à ma grand-mère ma crainte à la fois de la réveiller, et si elle était éveillée déjà, de n'être pas entendu d'elle et qu'elle n'osât bouger, puis aussitôt comme la réplique d'un second instrument, m'annonçant sa venue et m'invitant au calme. Je n'osais pas m'approcher de cette cloison plus que d'un piano où ma grand-mère aurait joué et qui vibrerait encore de son toucher. Je savais que je pourrais frapper maintenant, même plus fort, que rien ne pourrait plus la réveiller, que je n'entendrais aucune réponse, que ma grand-mère ne viendrait plus. (762-3)

So as no longer to see, I turned toward the wall, but, alas, against me was the partition that had served of old between us as a morning messenger, that partition which, docile as a violin and rendering all the nuances of a feeling, spoke so exactly to my grandmother of my fear both of waking her up, or, if she was already awake, of not being heard by her, and of her not daring to move, then at once, like a second instrument taking it up, announcing her coming and exhorting me to stay calm. I no more dared to approach that partition than a piano on which my grandmother had been playing and that was vibrating still from her touch. I knew that now I could knock, more loudly even, that nothing could again wake her, that I would not hear any response, that my grandmother would never again come. (161)

Looking toward the bare wall for some peace, he comes up against the screen that once divided his bed from his grandmother's and connected them in the mornings, like a messenger or musical instrument transmitting Marcel's anxiety to his grandmother and in turn the imminence of her appeasing arrival to him. Suddenly this object's presence reveals an old meaning through the function it can never perform again, quite like a broken telephone. So he backs away from this side of the bed too, knowing that the instrument will no longer connect him to her, *and simultaneously feeling it vibrate*, as if she had played it a moment ago. This short-circuit derives from the non-linear temporality intrinsic to the experience. A few passages earlier the narrator clearly explains:

...ce fut tout naturellement, non pas après la journée actuelle que ce moi ignorait – comme s'il y avait dans le temps des series différentes et parallèles – sans solution de continuité, tout de suite après le premier soir d'autrefois, que *j'adhérai à la minute* où ma grand-mère s'était penchée vers moi. (757; my emphasis)

...it was quite naturally, not after the day we were living, of which that self knew nothing, but—as if there were, in time, different and parallel series—without any break in continuity, immediately after that first evening in the past, that *I adhered to the moment* when my grandmother had leaned toward me. (156)

And this adhesion of discontinuous moments intensifies the sensorial effect of the protagonist's surroundings, generating even more stickiness: it is as if the lived experiences and the materiality that hosted, blindly witnessed them, were no longer separable. With the past's wound into the present and the seaside's beauty carving a void in Marcel's heart, between the open shutters and the screen it feels like a layer of the world's skin has peeled off, leaving the raw flesh exposed, almost unbearable to see. Only then do objects such as a screen in the Balbec hotel room, a red telephone in the New Delhi hotel room, acquire distinctive features before their user's sight.

From this experience the logic of the media employed for *Douleur exquise* becomes evident. The narrator in *Les intermittences du coeur* presents us with a bright bedroom (literally a “chambre claire”) inside which exposure causes images past to become fixed and developed, like film, in the present. In his theoretic-poetic piece *La chambre claire*, Roland Barthes, another great Proustian,²¹ declares, on the one hand, that there is no Proustian recollection of the past in Photography (“rien de Proustien dans une photo”), on the basis of its inability to reconstitute lost time or distance, which he considers different from a photo's certification that *this was* “ça a été” (129). On the other hand, he importantly recalls the scene where Marcel unties his boots:²²

Pour une fois, la photographie me donnait un sentiment aussi sûr que le souvenir, tel que l'éprouva Proust, lorsque se baissant un jour pour se déchausser il aperçut brusquement dans sa mémoire le visage de sa grand-mère véritable.” (109)

²¹ His own confession in *Le plaisir du texte* is the best proof of his Proustianism: “I recognize that Proust's work, for myself at least, is *the* reference work, the general *mathesis*, the *mandala* of the entire literary cosmogony—as Mme de Sévigné's letters were for the narrator's grandmother, tales of chivalry for Don Quixote, etc.; this does not mean that I am in any way a Proust “specialist”: Proust is what comes to me, not what I summon up...” (36).

²² Yve-Alain Bois opposes this passage in Barthes' text to Sophie Calle's approach to photography in “Tigresse de papier.”

For once, photography gave me a sentiment as certain as remembrance, just as Proust experienced it one day when, leaning over to take off his boots, there suddenly came to him his grandmother's true face." (*Camera Lucida* 70)

More than a recollection, the morning sequence from *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, which follows the boot scene, narrates a photographic experience of the past in its singularity, what Barthes calls "ça," and the shocking absolute loss appearing with the past's "living reality." Barthes considers photography according to its particular way of engaging the referent (as opposed to other semiotic artifacts):

Quoi qu'elle donne à voir et quelle que soit sa manière, une photo est toujours invisible: ce n'est pas elle qu'on voit.

Bref, *le référent adhère*. Et cette adhérence singulière fait qu'il y a une très grande difficulté à accommoder sur la Photographie. (18; my emphasis)

Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.

In short, *the referent adheres*. And this singular adherence makes it difficult to focus on Photography. (6)

Through this complicated *adherence* of the referent to the (disappearing) surface as photography's distinctive and melancholic trait, Barthes considers what we have just analyzed in the morning scene at the Balbec hotel in "Les intermittences du coeur:" the frozen moment's non-metaphoric insertion in another present, indexicality, and especially the affective short-circuit in reality and cognition it can sometimes produce. Sophie Calle's piece capitalizes on precisely these potentials, so it only makes sense the photography be one of its major components. But as Barthes explained, there are several ways to engage with a photograph, and its affective intensity does not necessarily disclose itself. Hence, in reconstructing the material site of the protagonist's pain, *Douleur exquise* installation art makes this affective dimension available to the viewer.

Without spatial entry into *Douleur* as the room where pain found Sophie and as the very scene of pain, no disturbance of usually separate realms would occur. No confusion of selves in

times past or alternate lives. And without the self's wavering and the world's other face emerging, no direct sense of pain, embodied by each material component, would adhere to the viewer. It would remain at the level of merely report or documentary. Consequently, without the installation experience the insistent photograph in *Après la douleur* could not convey pain directly. Its power would be exclusive to Sophie's sight, in the way that "la Photo du Jardin d'hiver" 'The Winter Garden Photo' was impossible to see by anyone besides Barthes, who on this matter addresses the reader in his unmistakable parenthetical voice:

(Je ne puis montrer la Photo du Jardin d'Hiver. Elle n'existe que pour moi. Pour vous, elle ne serait rien d'autre qu'une photo indifférente, l'une des mille manifestations du "quelconque"; elle ne peut en rien constituer l'objet visible d'une science; elle ne peut fonder une objectivité, au sens positif du terme; tout au plus intéresserait-elle votre *studium*: époque, vêtements, photogénie, mais en elle, pour vous, aucune blessure.) (114-15)

(I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the "ordinary;" it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of a science; it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term; at most it would interest your *studium*: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound.) (73)

A photograph's "existence," Barthes suggests, would have to do with a wound, contrary to an emotionally detached visual practice that focuses on the photograph's familiar or domesticated features and yields the "quelconque," 'nondescript.' This is what he designates as the *studium*, in opposition to that uncanny detail in the photograph that conjures up another way of seeing, the *punctum*, through which the photograph's "tel" 'this-ness' appears, and which can be experienced as a collapse of time.

In describing *Douleur Exquise* Yve-Alain Bois accurately names the insistent image of the bed and red telephone on the upper left-hand side of each diptych in panel three of the piece "the Catastrophe photograph" (124). One should add that the Catastrophe not only refers to content (the telephonic breakup recounted in each variation of what he calls the Tale of Betrayal,

below such an image); rather, it names the catastrophe of time and of the *studium* function, and their ruin allows the viewer to encounter this image from the wound's perspective. It only makes sense that the passage of time noted in each narrative (e.g. “Il y a 90 jours, l’homme que j’aime m’a quitté.” ‘90 days ago the man I love left me.’) should leave the Catastrophe photograph intact.



Figure 37. Sophie Calle, *Douleur exquise* (Detail from *Après la douleur*. On left: “Il y a 91 jours...”)

As the sequence *Après la douleur* progresses, words gradually fade into the dark surface, which suggests the writing practice that forms part of what the narrator defines as an “exorcism” from pain is effective. But the image remains neat and bright from the first to the 99th day, when there are no words left to read on the dark linen. Does the empty, made bed indicate Sophie’s lingering sadness over this man who did not join her in bed that time? Is that it? The contrast between the image’s and the text’s fate here presents a wordless remainder that is (at best) pointed to, never articulated, explained away, liquidated. Calle’s most frequent combination of media brings word and text side by side. There is a photograph and its caption, or a story and its photographic evidence, where story and displayed object have to do with Sophie’s life; in any case, the match

is imperfect. In the combination *Après la douleur* presents, the process of viewing, narrating, and reading lead to a viewer's experience of non-synchronicity between text and image, as a way of presenting what is at stake in this combination, namely a limit to total processing, or in this case, dissolution of pain. Words in the Tale of Betrayal land just below the image, never exactly on the wordless target the snapshot hits.²³ A *Douleur* hotel room's guest will have acquired an intimate sense of this residue that nonetheless leaves her searching for the sense of this pain, beyond its futile circumstances. The following sections interpret the function of this residue in *Douleur exquise*, emphasizing its immanence to the ethical relevance of the work of art.

Something Old, Something True

An uncanny shift upon the way of looking and the order of time is already at work in *Avant la douleur*, the first of the triptych's three panels. Its sequence of images and texts designates the set of days dedicated to that trip to Japan. With its collection of receipts, letters, and photos of monuments, traditional cultural sites, train compartments, companions, etc., it represents a travelogue, and because one knows Sophie is leaving a lover she wants to return to in Paris, it is also a daily countdown to the end of their separation. However, her affective curve during this countdown along with its meaning, are retroactively turned on their head, first by the above-presented message that he will not come, then by his ending their relationship during a long-distance phone call. This is not only recounted in the third panel's narratives, but also marked by a red ink stamp on each day of *Avant la douleur*.

²³ In Barthes' terms: "Pour designer la réalité, le bouddhisme dit *sunya*, le vide; mais encore mieux: *tathata*, le fait d'être tel, d'être ainsi, d'être cela; *tat* veut dire en Sanskrit *cela* et ferait penser au geste du petit enfant qui désigne quelque chose du doigt et dit: *Ta, Da, Ça!* Une photographie se trouve toujours au bout de ce geste; elle dit *ça, c'est ça, c'est tel!* mais ne dit rien d'autre; une photo ne peut être transformée (dite) philosophiquement, elle est tout entière lestée de la contingence dont elle est l'enveloppe transparente et légère" (15-16). "In order to designate reality, Buddhism says *sunya*, the void; but better still, *tathata*, the fact of being this, of being thus, of being so; *tat* means *that* in Sanskrit and suggests the gesture of a child pointing his finger at something and saying *that, there it is, lo!* But says nothing else; a photograph cannot be transformed (spoken) philosophically, it is wholly ballasted by the contingency of which it is the weightless, transparent envelope" (4-5).



Figure 38. Sophie Calle, *Douleur exquise* (Avant la douleur, DOULEUR J – 51)

If a neutral reading of the images is lost for the viewer from the moment they are framed within the story of a woman longing for her lover, then each day's stamp materially perturbs and semiotically alters them a second time. Suddenly the photograph itself is visible, and not only its referent, as Barthes had pointed out. Shirley-Ann Jordan analyzed the red stamp's connotative quality, pointing out that it replicates a visa stamp. A photo of Calle's open passport, featuring the stamp of entry to Japan and her own red one on the opposite page, best showcases the purpose of stamping: "to displace the trajectory of travel by the trajectory of escalating romantic disappointment through insistence upon the daily renewal of her presence in the territory of suffering" (Jordan 201). The strategy of repetition seen in *Après la douleur* is also at work here with the stamp, and its reconfiguration according to the pain that awaits one at the end of the sequence (in the installation or central panel) clashes with the love letters which show Sophie's excitement grow as the day of *Douleur* comes closer. Calle's stamp also produces a change in the recurrent close shots of empty seats, beds, dinner tables, which Jordan deems "figures of disappearance and absence" (201). For, if the absence these photos observed at the time they were taken was that of Sophie missing her man, the stamp situates this meaning at a level of enunciation that is tragically confined to the snapshot's present; the latter's unawareness of

where the sequence is really headed is marked by the stamp. As one is able to see the inexorable mark that remained invisible to Sophie-the-photographer/

traveler in the moment, the images retroactively become warning signs of imminent pain.

Above, for example, “DOULEUR J – 51” (the literal translation would be “Pain D – 51”) (Figure 39) features a Zen sand sculpture or mandala; a cultural tourist’s classic image of Japan, famously striking for the amount of work and time it takes the monks to build this ephemeral outdoor piece, exposed to complete dissolution by the weather. This work contemplates life’s impermanence. The red stamp placed exactly on the image of the sculpture confirms its downfall and makes it signify that of whatever hopes its viewer has built in the present, while preserving the document of something that, at least for a moment, was (“ça a été,” in Barthes terms).

Jordan’s analysis highlights the fact that *Douleur Exquise*, at least in the 2003 *M’as-tu vue* exhibit, does not lead the viewer out of the piece after *Après la douleur*’s last story, even when the narrator ends it with a curt “Suffit” ‘enough.’ Rather, the gallery space makes the piece coil back into the *Douleur* hotel room. Jordan interprets this as “the exquisite temptation to revisit the point of grief” (207). It is obviously also tempting to revisit *Avant la douleur* once one has gone through the whole trajectory, and this because of the time reversals, over-determinations, and narrative strategies through which the event is grasped. For example, Jordan notes, on “J – 5” the photograph features an analog telephone under a clock, which retroactively appears as a *vanitas* and a prefiguration of the red telephone in the hotel room (189). The third panel’s “Tale of Betrayal” variations add details not only about the lovers’ last conversation, but also on the premises of the romantic situation between Sophie and her traitor, and these shed yet another light on the content of the images. Photographs of dresses and outfits in *Avant la douleur*

for instance do not just index her obsessive preparations to see/be seen by him again, as she writes in one of her letters:

Mon amour, Je suis allée chez Yamamoto choisir mon trousseau. L'essayage a pris des heures... Il faut que ma tenue ne se froisse pas durant le voyage, soit assortie à l'Inde, en harmonie avec le contexte: *retrouvailles à l'aéroport...*

My Love, I went to Yamamoto to choose my trousseau. ...I spent hours trying things on. ... My outfit must travel well in the plane and suit the circumstances: *reunion in India*.



Figure 39. *Douleur Exquise* (Avant la douleur DOULEUR J-3) Figure 40. (Avant la douleur DOULEUR J-6)

Reading through *Après la douleur* reveals the character's obsession with attire to attract her lover has to do, rather, with the image of the bride. "Il y a 5 jours, l'homme que j'aime m'a quittée. ... Pour notre première nuit, je me suis glissée dans le lit vêtue d'une robe de mariée. (...)" (204) '5 days ago, the man I love left me. ... On our first night, I slipped into bed in a wedding dress.' The narrator repeats this little story through the first month after the Catastrophe, and even has its own title, "La robe de mariée," in her book *Des histoires vraies + dix* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2002). This book, its installation versions, and other pieces insist on staging the bride figure qua impossible: if not the man, then the dress is missing (as in the film *No Sex Last Night*, where she gets married in a drive-thru chapel in Las Vegas), or official permission is denied to get married

in a particular place.²⁴ So many instances of failed consummation of the love promise Sophie desperately seems to seek begin to show that, on another level (that of the unconscious?), she might be after something else. Perhaps the necessity of the course Sophie's voyage happens to run in *Douleur exquise* lies beyond the traitor's actions.²⁵ After all, why did she prefer to leave her lover and risk the relationship's safety over going to Japan, a place she was not interested in? Recall the "watery Venice" this chapter began by evoking: one ought to call this instance of deviating from safe grounds that is her trip (Calle's, and the *Exquisite Pain* viewer's) a *research* trip in the strict sense in which Deleuze understands Proust's title *A la recherche du temps perdu*, that is, as a research project on lost time *and* a rigorous learning experience that only comes at the cost of "common good will."²⁶

"Pour notre première nuit, je me suis glissée dans le lit dans une robe de mariée." 'On our first night, I slipped into bed in a wedding dress.' Sophie played the bride when she "slipped into

²⁴ For instance, at the Charles de Gaulle Airport, before the groom leaves on a plane to China; her wedding/mourning dress in the picture for this story is exquisite-pain red.

²⁵ "...je suis partie au Japon, alors qu'il m'avait prévenue qu'il ne patienterait pas aussi longtemps. Je n'ai pas voulu le croire. J'ai été punie, ce voyage fut un cauchemar, je comptais les jours qui me séparaient de nos retrouvailles. Car il fallait qu'il m'attende. J'ai presque gagné" (232). 'I left for Japan, when he had warned me that he would not wait that long. I didn't want to believe him. I was punished, the journey was a nightmare, I counted the days to our reunion. He had to wait for me. I almost won.' But what could Sophie have actually won by her man's waiting for her at the end of the trip?

²⁶ See *Proust et les signes* (Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 2003). Deleuze presents this work of literature as a search for the truth competing with philosophy to show the latter's limitation and the former's advantages: "Dans la philosophie, il y a "ami". ... Les amis sont, l'un par rapport à l'autre, comme des esprits de bonne volonté qui s'accordent sur la signification des choses et des mots: ils communiquent sous l'effet d'une bonne volonté commune. ... C'est que la philosophie, comme l'amitié, ignore les zones obscures où s'élaborent les forces effectives qui agissent sur la pensée, les déterminations qui nous *forcent à penser*. ... Aux vérités de la philosophie, il manque la nécessité, et la griffe de la nécessité. En fait, la vérité ne se livre pas, elle se trahit; elle ne se communique pas, elle s'interprète; elle n'est pas voulue, elle est involontaire. ... La pensée n'est rien sans quelque chose qui la force à penser, qui fait violence à la pensée" (116-17). "In the philosopher there is the "friend." ... Friends are, in relation to one another, like minds of goodwill who are in agreement as to the signification of words and things: they communicate under the effect of a common good will. ... Philosophy, like the friend, ignores the obscure zones where effective forces that act upon thought are elaborated, the determinations that *force us to think*. ... The truths of philosophy lack the label of necessity. In fact, truth is not released, but rather betrayed; it is not communicated, but rather interpreted; it is not wanted, it is involuntary. ... Thought is nothing without something that forces it to think, something that does violence to thought" (97). *Proust and Signs* Trans. Richard Howard. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). In this sense *Douleur exquise* operates exactly according to the literary search for truth, initiated by violence and not limited to rational agreement and common good will.

bed” with a man whose engagement to love her is uncertain. What is the function of this dress? In the moment, that of sparking the sexual fantasy of deflowering virginal purity, maybe. Also, linked to the threat of separation that haunts the relationship from the outset, her memory of wearing a wedding dress to embark on the sexual act and tragic love story with this man comes through as a failed amulet, where the outcome of that initial “slipping into bed” is nothing other than this image of the empty hotel bed in its painful insistence. One knows—from the Japanese psychics she consults (the fact that she doesn’t understand Japanese doesn’t seem to matter to her) and from the visual attention her photos pay to traditional Buddhist and Shinto wish-making practices—that she feels highly uncertain that the happy outcome she wants for this story will come to pass. One can say she wears the dress to bed with this man just as the bride would arm herself for the altar with what the old saying prescribes: “something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.”

An emblem of a classic feminine role, the wedding dress is itself “something old” in this work of art, something old enough to give up, even. And Sophie does let go, in favor of the work of art, even if they are incompatible. If the performative act itself of incarnating the bride, of constituting oneself as married woman, follows the amulets’ compulsive logic of countering anxiety-provoking uncertainty, then it may symptomatically expose a flaw where this fantasy is grounded. “Something old” gives way to “something true.” To obsessively follow this fantasy, acting it out to the point of exhaustion and playing on its imperfection, is to know one is not entirely supported by what holds civilization together, and therefore to be rather skeptical of it.²⁷

²⁷ This is what Jacques Lacan underscores by using the expression “not-all” to define femininity and the problem it poses to an Aristotelian logic of universals and particulars, when he explains sexual difference in terms of the relation to the phallic function. She is not-all subjected to the signifier of the phallus, and her excessive jouissance bears a relation to the Other for which there is no signifier, where language fails. See Suzanne Barnard, “Tongues of Angels: Feminine Structure and Other Jouissance.”; Willy Apollon, “The Jouissance of the Other and the Sexual

This, in *Douleur exquise*, is what becomes exposed when the dress is used as a prop to act out a sexual fantasy instead of worn at her official wedding. Beyond the protagonist's attempt to secure her relationship to this man, by wearing the wedding dress without actually getting married, she lifts a veil on the ritual that would externally certify this engagement and provide official inscription in the social order, and so addresses a desire to unveil this order that thwarts the faithful bride's path (whether or not the man decides to wait for her at the end of the aisle). So what does the social fabric cover up?



Figure 41. (DOULEUR J-56)



Figure 42. (DOULEUR J-8)

It is exactly what she photographs on the empty beds throughout *Douleur exquise* (Figs. 42 and 43, for example) and elsewhere, for instance in a film with Shepard, the title—*Double Blind AKA No Sex Last Night*—highlighting the thing. Body traces furrow the bed sheets, or the bed is neatly made, but in every case it is vacant. In the film, images of the empty bed reappear with Sophie's voiceover stating "no sex last night," gradually reduced by force of repetition to a simple "no." Her dramatization of the unsatisfying situation of the couple not engaging in the

Division in Psychoanalysis"; Tracy McNulty, "The Other Jouissance, a Gay *Sçavoir*: Feminine Hospitality and the Ethics of Psychoanalysis," in *The Hostess*.

sexual act during this film tells part of the truth; what the bed photographs “reveal,” whether or not the couple manages to have sexual intercourse one night, is something Jacques Lacan articulated as the impossibility of the sexual relation or of two becoming one, which love tries to make up for. Calle’s piece recalls Homer’s Penelope: if Sophie’s art project with that travel grant seemed like a work of weaving (her wedding veil?) to be completed by her return to her lover’s side, then the red stamp on each image is its undoing. But the two tales are not quite the same; after all, she left home like Odysseus, instead of faithfully remaining, like Penelope. Moreover, unweaving does not play out on a voluntary level for Sophie-the-researcher, and its effect is truly disruptive, not leading to her reunion with her lover, but instead to confronting the empty bed as untranslatable, exquisite pain, that is to say, as unsymbolizable a letter as the Japanese kanji are for her:



Figure 43. (DOULEUR J – 55. The sign could also read “When the paper dissolves in water... the real will emerge.”)

This “research trip” of Sophie’s leads to the encounter of the limits of language; for those who, like Sophie, cannot read kanji the letter emerges in its dimension outside meaning,²⁸ as a letter of jouissance.²⁹ It is striking that of all places to use the travel grant she chose Japan. She offers this explanation for her choice:

On m’avait accordé une bourse d’études d’une durée de trois mois, à New York. ... J’avais des habitudes nonchalantes dans cette ville. Je redoutais ma désinvolture. Comment être certaine de vivre une expérience singulière, tirer profit de ce voyage? J’ai préféré me rendre là où j’avais le moins envie d’aller. Non par masochisme. Mais pour que ce périple influence de façon plus tangible ma vie. J’ai choisi le Japon. (16)

I was awarded a three-month grant to study in New York. ... Familiarity with the place had bred a certain nonchalance, so how could I be sure of experiencing anything unusual there, of really taking advantage of my stay? I distrusted my frivolity. Instead of New York, then, I would go someplace I really did not want to visit. Not out of masochism, but because the experience would be more vivid. After giving the matter some thought, I decided the country in question was Japan.

Far from feeding any kind of Japanophilia, she enters a set of days during which it is challenging to communicate with almost anyone. Her narrative recounts that to get there she takes the train to Moscow, traverses Russia and Mongolia, stops in Beijing, and takes local trains across China and to Hong Kong, where she finally takes a plane to Tokyo. It is 1984, so the Soviet state is still in place, and this means everyday life should be palpably different from her usual one in Paris. It will be—if only because she will have to sleep in train compartments with strangers.³⁰ She claims that with this strategy she can shorten her dreaded stay in Japan, but in fact it is a more radical way to a true displacement of “self,” in a French locution, to “se dépayser.” Sophie is forced to slow down, feel the loss of her habits, her customary image of civilization, and plunge

²⁸ Roland Barthes explores this in *L’empire des signes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2005-07).

²⁹ In Colette Soler’s words: “...the letter does not “represent” jouissance, it *is* jouissance. It has no referent, it is thus real. ...The letter cancels the referential function of language: the letter imposes itself, within language, as an exception to the chain” (92). See “The paradoxes of the symptom in psychoanalysis.”

³⁰ Communism and sharing space, time, and food with strangers are emphasized through the images and the descriptions of places seen during the train voyage included in the letters she writes for her lover.

into another world.³¹ We are not talking about some form of escapism: from the outset this experience does violence to her every mode of comfort, which confirms that her project requires her to draw a path outside language's communicative function, outside a sense of familiarity and identity in her investigation on the other, even if she must put herself through uncomfortable, absurd, even risky situations.³²

Deviance from communication and from safe love at her partner's side as his "petite femme chérie" (120) 'darling little wife'³³ is clearly a condition for the art project. Not, however, to assert herself under the identity of the woman artist. What matters here, beyond the artist's completing and exhibiting another piece, and beyond the sentimental cure the last third of the piece is supposed to produce for Sophie, is that the work of art create a space where another kind of relation to words and images, and to the Other, is possible. This depends on the work's ability to uphold, for the reader/viewer/visitor, desire's shift away from narcissistic love; for it then becomes possible to greet what this shift unveils. A space where research is not only reported, but continues to take place.

On the one hand, Japanese kanji set forth the material dimension of letters without meaning to her, and thus put her on the track that leads to the work of art as construction of a letter. In the same way, interactions with strangers who do not speak her language have an

³¹ With MacCannell (cited at the beginning of this chapter) one might call this the "Watery Venice effect." "In Venice you walk or slow down to the tempo of the water transport; you forgo the torque and acceleration of vehicular land transit; you dispense with motorized, wheeled, high velocity conveyances. ...In Venice, as Mann and others have learned, you can only get carried *away*" (63). Here, although wheeled, the choice of trains instead of airplanes to go through Eastern Europe and communist Asia has the same effect.

³² Strangers are essential characters throughout Calle's oeuvre. Already in *Les dormeurs* (1979), an early action piece, she plays hostess to strangers who are invited to sleep in her bed while she photographs and asks them questions. *Suite vénitienne* (1983) is exciting in that she is following a man she only met once, and yet she devotes all of her time and energy to tracing him in Venice, which in the local people's eyes (and sometimes her own) shapes her into a kind of betrayed lover of his. See MacCannell's "Death Drive in Venice" for an analysis of this effect.

³³ The lover addresses her in these terms in one of the letters he sends her. On "love letters" and narcissism see Colette Soler's above-cited article.

alienating effect, highlighting the failings of communication that account for the absence of sexual relation. On the other hand, Japan shows her masses of locals and foreigners streaming through with their personal discontents and addressing them to the water, the gods, fortune, in sum an imaginary Other to solve them. In spite of intensified difference an important commonality appears. She sometimes participates in this kind of distressed letter writing, in addition to her letters addressed to “Mon amour” that describe some of her adventures. But what she discovers in these practices is not so much a technique to wash away uneasiness. (In fact, she uncovers their failure, as the previous analysis has shown.)³⁴ Instead, they provide a model for the other half of *Douleur exquise*’s third panel, *Après la douleur*. The work of art wears “something old, something true...”

Something Borrowed

Each day’s Tale of Betrayal is accompanied by a different tale of pain on the right-hand side. Other narrators tell them in the first person. Just as those Japanese altars shelter a multiplicity of personal stories, so does this “curative” technique line the walls with the others’ precise memories of sorrow. The unique moment is sometimes but not necessarily brought about by the end of a love relationship. Deaths of loved ones in varying conditions, the sudden loss of vision, a letter that never arrives, a nightmare, a toothache, and even nothing at all, are some other causes of the most intense pain these individuals ever experienced. It is possible to see the varying photos on the right-hand side of each representation of a day as an exercise to counterbalance the main narrator’s own paralysis in time. “Something borrowed,” in this case a set of painful stories, might contribute to the protagonist’s cure through its variety, by opposing

³⁴ These prayers fail to fulfill her wishes, but the consequence of this disappointment is not simply that God does not exist. On Nietzsche and the “death of God,” Tracy McNulty explains: “The death of God means that there is a void in the place of the Other of the address. But because of this, *we* are voids too. (...) The fact that there is no Other to whom the subject can appeal for help or redemption does not change the fact that he is faced with an Other of whom he has no idea, an Other to whom the drives respond” (192-93). *The Hostess*.

her own repetition. After all, this is what Sophie claims to be doing by interviewing other people: “Quand avez-vous le plus souffert?” (202) ‘When did you suffer most?’ she asks them. “Cet échange cesserait quand j’aurais épuisé ma propre histoire à force de la raconter, ou bien relativisé ma peine face à celle des autres.” ‘I decided to continue such exchanges until I had got over my pain by comparing it with other people’s or had worn out my own story through sheer repetition.’

After the stakes of the situation, namely the confronted impossibility of sexual relation, this gesture of exchange with the other deserves attention. From these borrowed, heterogeneous fragments a new chain is made after the trip to Japan; its logic, connecting discontinuous moments by disparate participating minds without seeking to build a coherent tale together, is that of the surrealist parlor game *Cadavre exquis*, which the title *Douleur exquise* evokes. The game consists in producing a body of text or image from fragments several parties contribute without knowing what the others have introduced, which prevents each one’s drawing or writing to attempt to impose meaning on the whole, and results in an involuntary articulation. For the surrealists, this relative renunciation of mastery over a work’s meaning at the level of process, in favor of chance and the unconscious, was a condition for authentic creation. Although Calle does not reproduce this strategy exactly, she does introduce a strictly alien element into the creative writing process, by resorting to what is as punctual and irreplaceable as the crux of her story, namely, the most painful moment in the lives of a series of people, “mes interlocuteurs, amis ou rencontres de fortune” (202) ‘friends and chance encounters.’ Once Pain-the-Stranger greets Sophie in hotel room 261, in lieu of the known and expected groom, she is ready to welcome strangers *and* their own unexpected Pain-Strangers into her research. The question is, are they replacing her lover, covering up the empty bed, allowing her to “move on” and away from pain?

To the verbal accounts, woven in black thread onto white linen rectangles, inverting the colors on the Tale of Betrayal, Calle attaches a photograph produced on her own, in an attempt to approximate, through the sense of sight, each story's irreplaceable sensation of pain. The inversion then also applies to the text-image relation on the diptychs' other side: while on the left words never zero in on the untranslatable "thisness" of the hotel bedroom image, just like Barthes' theory of photography claims, on the right it is the photo that strives to approach the tale, to lend an image to a solitary experience and raise its aesthetic singularity to the status of art.³⁵

³⁵ Jean-Michel Rabaté examines this gesture through *Pas pu saisir la mort* (2007), Calle's most controversial piece. In his palinode to a previous judgment against this video installation featuring Calle's dying mother in her deathbed while listening to Mozart's Clarinet Concerto in A Major (K622), Rabaté compares Calle's gesture—of finding a way for her mother to be present at the Venice Biennale since this was one of her wishes (others included listening to Mozart in her deathbed, visiting Proust's "Balbec" with Sophie before dying)—to that of Sophocles' Antigone as interpreted by Lacan in his *Ethics* seminar. He explains that Antigone does not counter Creon's order against burying Polynices based on another universal "categorical imperative," but rather on the grounds of desire as a figure of absolute singularity. In the Greek tragedy this desire's visibility is "blinding," making it difficult to behold, much in the way that it was difficult for Rabaté to bear the sight of this video for more than a moment, and especially in the way that the moment of death Calle wanted to capture with either her own eyes or the camera that rolled for eighty hours non-stop for this purpose, remains ungrasped. Antigone's beauty, he explains, "arrests desire, an "arrestedness" that suggests an intimate link between beauty and death." "Kallos Anti-Bathos? (From Calle to Freud, Lacan, and Back)" Sara Crangle, Peter Nicholls (eds.) *On Bathos. Literature, Art, Music*. (London/NY: Continuum, 2010) 179.

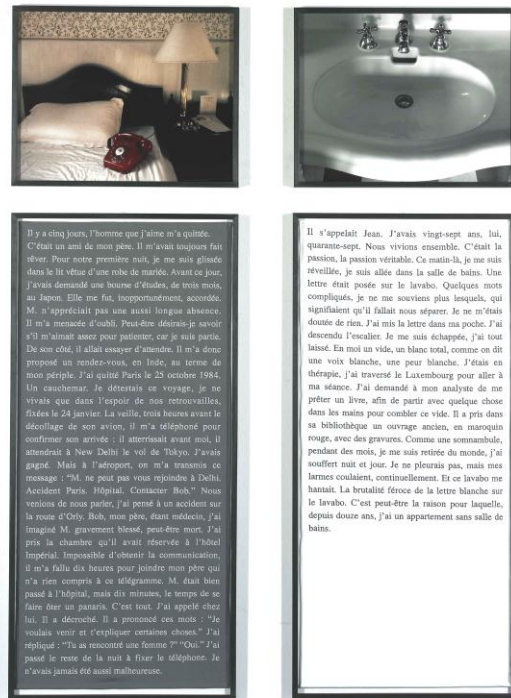


Figure 44. *Douleur exquise* (Après la douleur. "Il y a cinq jours...")

What exactly does "raising pain's singularity to the status of art" mean and how does it relate to the supposed cure from pain the narrator of exquisite pain is undertaking through the lending/borrowing process? Above all, it must mean something that does not at all resemble a self-restoring psychotherapy. One can trace the work of "something borrowed" through the example of this composition's right-hand side (Figure 45), the first in the series of stories told by the others. The white sink placed as the story's heading stands in for a certain breakup letter left on a certain sink for its narrator to read one morning. It is a scene in which a certain Jean has abruptly left her, deciding on his own that their passionate relationship should not continue. Her experience after this letter and his absence is described specifically: "En moi un vide, un blanc total, comme on dit une voix blanche, une peur blanche" (205) 'Inside me a void, a total blank,

as they say blank voice, a blank fear.’³⁶ Her sensations involve not only a feeling, but also a distinct color. White is the color of the void. She puts the letter in her pocket but feels this void in her empty hands, so to fill it she asks to borrow a book from her analyst, who accedes, and in her account she remembers the book cover’s red leather. The terrible whiteness comes back to the narrative further on, as the letter’s feature: “La brutalité féroce de la lettre blanche sur le lavabo.”

As in the Tale of Betrayal, an altered sense of time forms part of this white pain; the mourning process involves withdrawing from the world for months, and also this striking detail: “Je ne pleurais pas, mais mes larmes coulaient, continuellement. Et ce lavabo me hantait.” ‘I didn’t cry, but tears were constantly streaming from my eyes. And this washbasin haunted me.’ This sink is haunting insofar as it refers to the memory of its holding the awful letter, it is present in the moment of her loss. But as the first section of this chapter has shown through Proust’s scene in the Balbec Hotel next to Calle’s *Douleur*, in pain the referent adheres and in its specific materiality becomes inseparable from the loss. And in this case the sink, as a device to wash one’s hands, quite accurately becomes an unreadable letter, and a ghost sucking down the drain and into the void whatever her hands hold, from the moment they hold the letter left on it. And this void in her starts a leak, an unstoppable stream of tears, as if the sink’s hole with its ghostly gravity were drawing them. To put an end to being haunted: “depuis douze ans, j’ai un appartement sans salle de bains.” ‘for the last twelve years I have had an apartment with no bathroom, no basin.’

To definitely stop the leak she eradicates the washroom from her home. Outside the logic of this pain, such a drastic measure seems absurd, and a photograph of a sink is unremarkable.

³⁶ My translation. “Voix blanche,” a toneless voice, literally means “a white voice.” The English version drops these metaphors, unfortunately. The sentence is reduced to: “I totally blanked out” (205).

There is humor in the way the story is recounted, as in the ghostly sink's eerie reappearance above it. But this comical dimension is far from belittling the pain the story involves. According to this tale borrowing something, like a red book, derives directly from an experience of the void, as its antidote. To lend an image to this story, Calle reintroduces none other than the image of a sink, in painful white, which demonstrates that the point of this process of lending and borrowing in the work of art is not to cork up the void and its liquefying white force. Coming from a concrete, lived moment, the stories all involve some detail on sensations and perceptions that accompanied suffering, and these are the focus of the photographs. They do not hide but conversely highlight the fact that once the moment of suffering fades into the past a memory replaces it. Giving an image to this narrativized replacement has the function not so much of supplying a prosthetic relic of the past for the stories' owners (who probably often possess their own relics), as of attending to the unique modes of heightening or alteration of sensations introduced with pain. In many cases the photographs feature empty scenes that convey the irrevocable disappearance of that moment, a "remembrance of things past," as in this black and white shot of the Opéra metro station in Paris:

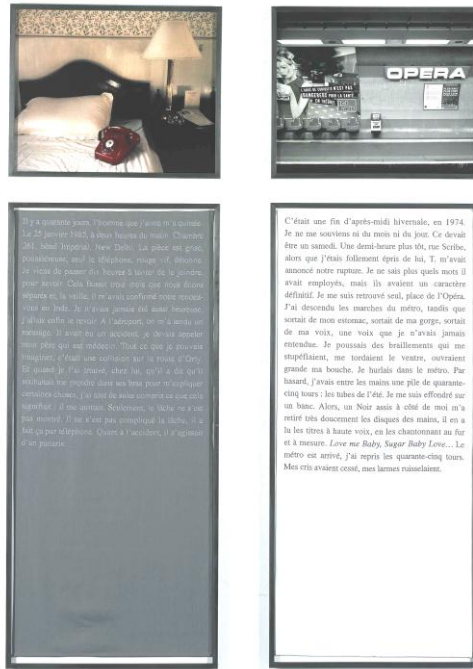


Figure 45. (*Après la douleur* “Il y a 40 jours...”)

In others, the image suggests the first-person narrator’s own visual perspective during the moment of pain. It may be the angle of the shot (e.g. a street seen from above to match a story of a sufferer looking down from their apartment window), or, as in this image, a color flooding the space within the frame, to represent the narrator’s experience of waking up to see red and nothing else through it, thus realizing that he has gone blind.



Figure 46. ("Il y a vingt et un jours...")

A degree of compassion and empathy are undeniably present in the photographic strategy, and the reader can easily be moved by some of the stories.³⁷ There is thus a sharing of pain; but what happens is far from a simple replacement of the absence of sexual relation confronted in the hotel room and the left-hand side of these diptychs, by a community of suffering, of lack. Or, if this is a community based on lack, then the singularity of this lack's manifestation insists upon the impossibility of unmediated communion; a community grounded on difference, not identity or identification. Its display targets the reader affectively, through both humor and pathos, and while tempting the inclination to identify with the other through these narrative and photographic strategies, the insurmountable difference or spatiotemporal gap

³⁷ Above, for example, headed by the red picture, a blind man tells the story of how his very poor mother, finding out he was in the hospital and had gone blind, gets on a boat from Oran, Algeria and begs for money to pay for the train from Marseille to Paris. He says this memory makes him suffer much more than the memory of losing his sight (223).

separating the viewer emerges at its most intense. Something borrowed can effect something else than the replacement of something old (i.e. the narcissistic love that reinforces selfhood).

Something New

The work of art according to this piece has consisted in articulating a relation of extreme affective proximity with the reader in order to disclose the paradoxal impossibility of sexual relation. *Avant la douleur* includes a great illustration of this proxy game and its surprising turn, and by chance it again involves water, the soluble medium throughout this inquiry on aesthetic experience.

While in Japan, Sophie comes across French writer Hervé Guibert, and some of the time they spend together forms part of Calle's trip sequence. In a letter to her lover, Sophie tells a little story of taking a bath in Hervé's bathtub, followed by his bathing in her water and asking if she would ever dare to do the same in her own parent's water to suggest that a kind of sexual contact is at stake. To this she responds by wanting to see him naked, which infuriates him and, after she shows herself naked to him, makes him want to strangle her. Interestingly, Sophie does not have an affair in any conventional way with Hervé (whose homosexuality is portrayed in his auto-fictive texts). However, this erotic incident of occupying the same spot in the bathtub and sharing the same water³⁸ has an underside, and that is the other's insurmountable difference or radical non-coincidence, perhaps marked by Sophie in wanting to display their naked bodies to each other, and retroactively emerging in the context of the 2003 exhibit, since four years after the trip Hervé discovered he had AIDS, causing his death in 1991. The photograph of an empty bathtub that accompanies this story in *DOULEUR – 57* looks more like a coffin.

³⁸ The repetition of the other's bodily disposition here evokes the one we have analyzed at the beginning, in the movement Proust's protagonist performs after his grandmother, to untie his boots, leading to "the upturning of the whole self."



Figure 47. (*Avant la douleur* DOULEUR J-57)

If for a moment water seemed like a miraculous element where sexual relation could finally take place, this illusion dissolves and rather suggests the dissolution of the living bodies' consistency, an image of death and the dissolution of self at the heart of eroticism. Regarding this commemoration of the other lost to death, the work's temporal gap emphasizes the degree to which Proust's narrator is on target when he advances that the two calendars, of facts and feelings, cannot coincide.

In sharing what can be grasped as the ordinary and the intimately personal in another's life, the work lures the self in, making it feel at home. And then, suddenly, exquisite pain is transmitted, destabilizing this self, since that is its distinctive trait. But disclosing Lacan's proposition that "there is no sexual relation" does not exhaust the work of art that *Douleur exquise* undertakes. It provides a kind of letter for this void, or a collection including as many as needed, which makes it a work of *Creatio ex-nihilo*, but even this is not the ultimate aim here. The issue lies in allowing another form of engagement to occur from this uncanny perspective and to make the reader a part of it. As proposed above, pain's privilege as affect for creation lies in its unexpected appearance, its disruption of ordinary life, in which the habit of calling it one's

own develops. It is a strange “other,” who contributes something involuntary, to put it in Proust’s terms. Thus, while the reader could never bring something new as imaginary Other, addressed in wish-making or in the love fantasy, there is still room for a pact of difference, precisely because there is spatiotemporal distance and no need to wear the masks of identity.³⁹ The work of art then offers itself as a field for the reader’s intimate strangeness⁴⁰ to connect with a Thing raised by the artist. *Douleur exquise* as new telephone line.

³⁹ In her reading of Friedrich Nietzsche’s notion of the Self as “mask,” Tracy McNulty formulates this identity function: “The Self is an artificial mask that imposes a recognizable face on what is fundamentally incoherent, and that sustains this illusion by means of the mirror image. But behind the mask—and beyond the tain of the mirror—is a truth that inspires terror not only in the observer, but in the mask-wearers themselves, who reject it so thoroughly that they dare not become conscious of it” (190-1) *The Hostess*.

⁴⁰ Lacan in his *Ethics* seminar calls this the paradoxal intimate exteriority or “extimité.” Within “me” resides “*la Chose*” ‘the Thing’ or “*das Ding*”: “étranger à moi tout en étant au coeur de ce moi.” 87 “stranger to me, and all at once at the heart of this me.” *L’éthique de la psychanalyse. Le séminaire livre VII 1959-60* (Paris: Seuil, 1986). This stranger lies close to the void hollowed out in the heart that Proust’s narrator mentions at the beginning of this chapter; they make way for the “intermittences of the heart.”

CONCLUSION

An Exquisite, Aesthetic Body

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Calle's piece introduces its title by presenting "douleur vive, nettement localisée" 'acutely felt, pinpoint pain' as its dictionary definition, specifying *douleur exquise* as a medical term; this recalls that 'douleur' speaks of something that can be felt both physically and psychically, and that pain necessitates a body as its location. This point made by the piece makes reference, again, to Christian suffering, which in art painting especially explored across historical periods. The logic of incarnation, of the ineffable and invisible divine becoming flesh, is in play in the creation of a painting, as a true rendering of the divine body of Christ.¹

Does *Douleur exquise*, a renewal of the triptych form in its three moments (*Avant la douleur*, *Douleur*, and *Après la douleur*) present a suffering body? The previous pages also suggested that "douleur exquise's" resonance with "cadavre exquis" is relevant in terms of the particular process this piece endorses in realizing the work of art, consisting in a collective contribution of fragments that results in forming a (dead) body. *Douleur exquise* suggests that the work calls forth a body; that the body as a location for this exquisite pain, is not given beforehand. What body does this piece develop, then? Each of the pieces this dissertation examined is also subject to this question. What body must the work constitute, and with what elements, to sustain and be a site for sensations (exquisite pain in Calle's case) to exist (which

¹ This idea is not merely an application of the Platonic theory of immaterial Forms or of the three orders of reality in Book X of the *Republic*, since the Incarnation of Christ revalorizes matter when the divine enters history in the human, mortal body of Jesus. The harmonious relation of eternity and time in the *Timaeus* has more affinities with this sense of painting as an intervention of the divine in the world. On this in the painting of divine icons see Marie-José Mondzain's *Image, icône, économie*. The event of Incarnation is what makes it possible to depict Christ in human form, despite the Old Testament's ban on icons and images of God.

entails sensations' viral character)? An aesthetic body, of course, but one must bear in mind that it is not a conceptually preexistent type artists materialize at their discretion. Producing the suitable body is a crucial problem the work of art can only undertake experimentally, and there is a rigor to the experiment. In this way, a research project on the body, through the processual realm of the work of art, takes place in a piece. In *Douleur exquise* it addresses the following question: how does the passage from a personal experience to an aesthetic one—here understanding 'aesthetic experience' as specific to the work of art or emerging within its domain—think pain?

Aesthetic experience supposes a shift, from the logic of particulars, not to the general or to universals, but rather to singularity. In Calle's piece, then, it is not from the individual/particular to the collective/general that the work displaces pain. The work's thinking pain is possible, first of all, by situating this thought in the domain of singularities. Also, and second, by making the aesthetic a domain for thinking *with* sensations, which does not in this case amount, as far as the viewer/reader undergoing this thinking process is concerned, to replacing judgments with emotional reactions to the piece. Rather than suspending the critical faculties in favor of an emotional response as viewing experience,² the challenge of the work is to harbor an aesthetic experience of thought pushed to the limits of language, as this dissertation has insisted. So in the case of *Douleur exquise*, thinking happens in collecting narratives of psychical pain, insistently caused for both its protagonist and the other suffering narrators by the specific loss of another body.³ In a way, then, what Calle sets the work to think is a psychical pain of the other body's absence, a point the chapter explored through the contention "there is no sexual relation" and its

² a position strongly sustained in the tradition of Christian divine-image viewing, which influenced the development of Western history of painting

³ Hence the empty, made-up bed, and on it the telephone, in lieu of the awaited lover, in the protagonist's case, or the empty sink that once held a disappeared lover's letter.

implication of a jouissance beyond meaning. What constitutes the aesthetic body, is a unique web of signifiers, whence this body's singularity emerges. To the extent that the aesthetic body must be capable of upholding this web and the a-signifying void at its center, it plays host to the unconscious.

The question of the aesthetic body speaks to desire, experience, and the ineffable by clarifying their status in the work of art. Whereas the group of believers' bodies "build," as members, the body of Christ, in *Douleur exquisite* its protagonist, the set of other sufferers, and the viewers of the piece realize or raise the work of art by going through, that is, by experiencing, this web of signifiers. The latter movement does not aim at unity or community in a doctrine; it does not forget that the *Cadavre Exquis* deals with the nonsense of multiple, partially blind construction (before the final product, the corpse's contributors do not see or read but a minimal portion of what others add to the piece) and that it exposes the monstrosity of heterogeneous parts that give death to the whole rather than life to one, glorious, and immortal body. Consider Horn's *Thames* photographic series, where the suicides' bodies add themselves to the elusive and changing body of water that to some extent takes its darkness from that fact. The ineffable in this and the other works this dissertation examined does not point to something beyond negativity. In the *other* relation, proposed by the work as divested from narcissistic selfhood, the parties' bodies engaged with the piece undergo, as mentioned previously, a transformation in the direction of a body sustained by immanent desire (a becoming-body without organs, in other words).

This transformation, or becoming, is present in all the peculiar modes of viewing, reading, and dwelling explored with each piece: Lispector's text calling a reader of "agora" 'now' into existence; Horn's making visitors take their shoes off to coexist with fields of words

and water columns in paradoxical texts and libraries of the ungraspable; Duras' disarticulation of viewing and hearing channels in her film, where the body is also dismembered by love; Bourgeois' cylindrical cell presenting the eye with concave and convex, molar and molecular, and Smith's interplay between words and tri-dimensional objects, making the eye leap from seeing to reading, and from seeing at the surface to seeing through glass, as exercises to contemplate life; and Calle's shifts, from the distant viewing of another's travel photographs, to the perspective of pain as a mode of reading an unsymbolizable letter, revealed in passing through the installation media.

In discussing the hysteria of Bacon's paintings, Deleuze suggested the possibility of speaking of this hysterical essence "under the rubric of a purely aesthetic clinic, independent of any psychiatry or psychoanalysis" (*Francis Bacon* 54). In the pieces examined here, the work of art in fact has the status of an aesthetic clinic, concerned with the problem of a joy/pain beyond meaning and its way of disorganizing bodies, and concerned with rethinking reading. Why did Deleuze propose to think in terms of a clinic? Because it is a constrained domain of intensive, specific, corporeal experiences. Just as the clinical dimension of psychoanalysis is essential to the thought it sets forth, the conceptual worth of the work of art comes through in an aesthetic experience, as a unique clinical process where signifiers open the way to a "gai savoir" about desire at the limits of the thinkable, or in Lacan's spelling, a *gai sçavoir* that involves the feminine. A different dialogue with psychoanalysis, for its concern with the savoir of the unconscious and its mode of engaging the body, can help develop a genuine aesthetic clinic as invoked by Deleuze, but also Bourgeois, in claiming art "a guaranty of sanity."

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